

Evoking the Past or Provoking the Gods? Some Observations on Period Reconstructions

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I begin with a confession: Not only do I try to visit Upper Canada Village [near Morrisburg, Ontario] once a year, but I have never been so proud of being an employee of the Canadian Parks Service as I was on an August day in 1984 when I first visited Louisbourg [Nova Scotia]. Indeed, my chest—such as it is—swelled with pride as I marvelled at the reconstruction and overheard one after another of my fellow vacationers say that this was the best such place they had ever visited—better even than Williamsburg.

Since my paper leans toward the “provoking the gods” side of the reconstruction debate, I am very conscious—after the above admission-of appearing to be a hypocrite. I have given this a lot of thought, and I think the only way I can rationalize the apparent contradiction is to go back and reexamine my reaction. As you will recall, I said that I was never so proud to be an employee of CPS. I did not say that I was struck by Louisbourg’s great importance to our history. In fact, I’m not sure that even occurred to me. I put the value on what we had created, not on the legacy we had inherited. Indeed one might say that the latter was incidental, if not irrelevant. Paradoxically, then, it was my very enthusiasm that sowed the seeds of doubt. I ask you to think about this as we continue.

In a world where operational demands are such that there is not enough time to get day-to-day things done, let alone keep abreast of what is going on in the organization or the world outside, workshops such as this give us an opportunity to look at the larger picture in a cross-functional forum that brings together people from the sites, the regional offices, and headquarters. In the case of National Historic Sites this is doubly important, because unlike our colleagues in National Parks, we do not have a sense of organizational identity that situates us in the larger universe of cultural heritage sites in Canada and elsewhere. We reap the consequences of our lack of identity, whether in the recent report prepared by the Evaluation Branch entitled “Canadian Parks Service Special Report on Consultations with Historical Heritage Experts,” which documents—unintentionally—an appalling ignorance of our program and, more importantly, a disturbing insensitivity both to history and to heritage, or in the feelings of many in CPS, particularly at the field level, that CPS senior management regards national historic sites as a minor concern.

Having just come off a long run of public consultations on the proposed CPS Policy document, I have come to the conclusion that one of the reasons why national historic sites do not figure prominently in either the public or senior management mind is that there do not appear to be significant policy issues associated with historic

sites or with cultural resource management (CRM). Robert Fulford’s lament “In Canada, an unexplored and unknown past remains one of our most crippling cultural problems,” has not been accorded the same degree of urgency by CPS as have threats to natural areas, nor has it been translated effectively into the organization’s mission. I see this workshop as an opportunity to develop a higher policy profile for historic sites. We will not resolve all or perhaps even many of the issues relating to reconstruction at this workshop, but we should all come away with an enhanced appreciation of the significant business we are in. Reconstruction raises fundamental questions about integrity, respect, value, public benefit, and understanding of national historic sites and cultural resources—the very principles upon which the CRM Policy is based. Considered in conjunction with the concept of “commemorative integrity,” reconstruction pretty well covers the spectrum of CRM issues.

Any discussion on reconstruction needs to distinguish between the reconstructions we already have—some of which we’ve made, some of which we have inherited—and those that might be proposed in the future. Too often the debate gets couched or interpreted by proponents, opponents, or both as a direct or indirect attack on what has been done in the past. We will make little progress if the workshop conforms to this model. I think we should celebrate, not denigrate, the reconstructions we have, where it has been determined through the application of CRM that these works have heritage value, and we should acknowledge that much of the finest work we have done on a broad range of activities has been done as a direct consequence of certain reconstruction projects.

We should also acknowledge that there is a range of reconstruction activities (from large-scale projects such as Louisbourg to reconstructions of individual buildings) and that generalizations will not apply in all instances. This is why the CRM Policy directs us to proceed on a case-by-case basis.

The focus of this paper is on future reconstructions. None of what I have to say is new or original, but given the nature of our work, an acknowledgement of the value of the old and existing hardly seems to be a damning admission.

While I do not subscribe to the view expressed by architectural historian Douglas Richardson that reconstructions are “as dead as any artificially animated rubber dodo that might be mounted on a genuine skeleton from Mauritius,” I don’t think any of us can or should avoid careful contemplation of Northrop Frye’s insight:

“The kind of preservation that we have in Williamsburg and similar large-scale open museums is in a sense almost anti-historical: it shows us, not life in time as a continuous process, but life arrested at a certain point, in a sort of semi-permanent drama. There is nothing wrong with this, but it gives us a cross-section of history, a world confronting us rather than preceding us.”

If there is one key message I want to communicate, it is that in considering any proposal for reconstruction, the burden of proof must always fall on the proponent. Too often we reverse this and put the burden on those who object to the proposal. Good practice demands that the proponent consider and assess honestly the pros and

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cons of a proposal and describe clearly who is to be held accountable for the information on which decisions are made—for example, who loses his or her job if the visitor projections upon which a reconstruction was approved are not met. I am surprised at how superficially the issue of reconstruction is often dealt with. Until this workshop, I don't think anyone in CPS had addressed whether visitation figures supported the widely held assumption that reconstructed sites are more popular than non-reconstructed ones, or whether reconstructions were an effective medium for communicating fundamental messages. In one planning document I read, the proponent merely reproduced Section 3.5.2.5.3 of CRM and the section of the old National Historic Parks Policy on reconstruction as the policy justification. This kind of non-analysis trivializes national historic sites. But before we blame the planners or the interpreters, we must admit that real analysis of significant policy issues has seldom been encouraged. And before someone dismisses such analysis as unproductive and time-wasting, let me remind you that these are the very sort of policy issues that people in national parks rightly raise, and that debates about how some proposal might impact on ecological integrity are considered essential to sound decisionmaking. We have experienced the consequences of being less rigorous.

To me, the fundamental question that should be asked whenever a reconstruction is proposed is: What is the net heritage benefit of the proposed reconstruction, particularly with respect to the national historic significance of the site? In other words, what, if anything, will the reconstruction add to the commemorative integrity of the site? In some cases, reconstruction may result in a net loss of heritage value. For example, the Minister directed that the Rideau Canal locks [Ontario] be preserved—that is to say, be considered nationally significant—because they possessed integrity as original works. As these locks are reconstructed they lose those qualities that led to their designation; that is to say, there is a net loss of heritage value.

One of the arguments most frequently advanced in support of reconstruction is that the public likes it. This argument has broad appeal, in part because it incorporates a genuine interest in what the public apparently thinks. But there is a darker side that few want to acknowledge, and that darker side is really an echo of Flip Wilson's popular expression of the 1970s that "the devil made me do it." In other words, public demand becomes something for the heritage professional to hide behind, particularly when tough questions get asked. I really admire the head of Program and Public Relations for the Royal Ontario Museum who cut through much current marketing pap and said, "We are not in the business of adapting our product to market taste, but rather we are in the business of educating public taste to appreciate our offerings." Of course, such a view is elitist. But it is also a view that respects the public and the public's intelligence. The fact is we probably could do a much better job getting the public to appreciate our offerings. As a first step, I would suggest focussing on communicating why our sites are nationally significant and hence important to all Canadians.

Another variation on the theme of public expectations is that reconstructions and other major forms of evoking the past are done in order to give the public a better idea of what the period or the place was really like. Yet it is also true that the public would have a better perception of what the flora and fauna in each national park look like if we established zoos and park-specific botanical gardens in each national park.

In considering reconstructions, I think it essential that we consider the reasons or motivations for reconstructing. We have already discussed, if only briefly, the considerations of public demand and public education. Proponents of reconstruction might reasonably ask whether critics would argue that the reconstruction of Leningrad after the Second World War should not have taken place. My answer is that this reconstruction grew out of a passionate conviction that what had been destroyed during the war was so significant to the Soviet Union and to the world that the reconstruction symbolized something well beyond the mere re-creation of an outstanding cultural landscape. I'm not sure that any of the reconstructions we are talking about fall into that category, but if Province House [Prince Edward Island] were to be destroyed by fire, I would probably be a proponent of its reconstruction because of its symbolic significance. I rather suspect that a similar impulse led the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to reconstruct Fort Walsh [Saskatchewan], and I think we should respect this even though we would not be moved by the same impulse to undertake reconstruction there.

I acknowledge that my statement on Province House sounds very much like "it's OK if I like it, but not OK if you like it." My only response is that we may differ on the specific example, but perhaps we can agree on the criterion of symbolic significance.

To a very real degree, reconstructions appeal to a sense of heritage rather than to a sense of history. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but we have always to keep in mind that the visitor should not leave sites of national historic importance with the impression that he or she has just visited blacksmithing or candle-making or bread-baking national historic sites.

Similarly, I think we also need to ask if it is a good idea for a reconstruction to become the signature feature of a site, as La Grande Maison has become for the Forges du Saint-Maurice [Quebec], the *Grande Hermine* for Cartier-Brébeuf [Quebec], and the sod buildings for L'Anse aux Meadows [Newfoundland]? To the extent that these features become the principal symbol of the site, have we not lost something or trivialized the genuine as well as the site's true significance?

Within CPS I have noted a curious reality, which I suspect is reflected in other agencies as well. As an organization we often place a higher *heritage* value on our own reconstructions than we place on genuine historic fabric. I recall being at a meeting where maintaining the "integrity" of the reconstructions at Louisbourg was considered to be the most important issue facing CPS. I left convinced that none of the proponents of that viewpoint would have accorded the same zeal to preserving the Halifax Citadel [Nova Scotia]. Clearly, we have a problem when professional staff insist on higher standards for preserving existing reconstructions or making new



ones than for preserving the real thing. There can be no better symbol of the value we attach to what we create than the pride of place accorded to the reconstructed HD-4 hydrofoil at Alexander Graham Bell NHS [Nova Scotia] while the real HD-4 is relegated to the sidelines, a virtual piece of historical detritus. At the same time, we tend to discount the heritage value of those reconstructions we did not make, but rather inherited (for example, Fort Walsh, Fort George [Ontario]). Ironically, anti-reconstructionists may place a higher heritage value on extant reconstructions than so-called pro-reconstructionists. Within heritage agencies, nothing appears to be more disposable than existing heritage interpretation. This is truly a curious phenomenon.

To a considerable degree, the impulse to reconstruct is very much part of the historic park ethos (although obviously not exclusively so). This ethos tends to value the place as an agency creation, that is to say as a "park," rather than seeing value or significance as emanating from the attributes (tangible and intangible, extant and missing) of the historic site.

There is a fascinating account in C.J. Taylor's *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada's National Historic Parks and Sites* that deals with the internal controversy over the reconstruction of Louisbourg. Taylor offers the interesting hypothesis that historic parks à la Louisbourg provided CPS with an opportunity to do things it would never contemplate doing in a national park such as Cape Breton Highlands [Nova Scotia] because of the "damage" that would be caused to a natural park by such a degree of intervention.

"Reconstructionists" sometimes describe those opposed to reconstructions as elitists. Underlying the elitist charge are certain assumptions, the most important of which is that there is not much that is genuine ("real") that is worth preserving in Canada and/or there isn't much significant period fabric that is under threat. To compensate, we in Canada have to re-create the past, unlike European countries, which having—apparently—escaped the scourge of two world wars and the postwar economic boom, have a lot of period stuff.

There are some 750 national historic sites across Canada, the vast majority of which are not managed by CPS. Many of these latter are among the most significant places in our human history, and almost all of them are under some continuing threat of impairment. Some 40 years ago the authors of the Massey Royal Commission Report wrote that "certain places still have the history of the past written on the very surface of the land, but this history is threatened every day with obliteration." As true as that was 40 years ago, it is even more the case today.

Given such a situation, it is difficult to argue that we should place a higher priority on re-creations at CPS-administered sites (in order to "improve" these sites) as opposed to focussing efforts toward preserving significant sites, regardless of ownership, that remain to be commemorated, or that have been designated but whose future is not secured because there is no funding.

We have worn a set of blinkers for so long that we are not even aware that over 80% of our vision of national historic sites has been impaired. We live in a world where the Rideau Canal is considered more important than the Welland Canal [Ontario], the Chilkoot Trail [British Columbia] more significant than the Canadian

Pacific Railway, and Anne of Green Gables [Prince Edward Island] more important than the Château Frontenac [Québec City], even though the latter is, along with the Parliament Buildings and Niagara Falls, probably the most recognized Canadian landmark. These levels of value or significance are based solely on the grounds that we own the Rideau, the Chilkoot, and Green Gables, but not the others. Caution suggests that if our impulse to reconstruct is not kept in check, we will be condemned to managing the ersatz while others deal with the genuine. Surely we can do better than play the role of fiddling Neros in the Canadian historic sites movement.

I find it interesting that one of our issues is titled "What are the Alternatives to Period Reconstruction?" Apart from the fact that some of the listed alternatives appear to be little *less* than period reconstructions under another name, the question seems to elevate period reconstruction to an end in itself, as though if we don't have or can't have a period reconstruction, we must have an alternative. To me, the question puts the emphasis on the wrong thing and tends to reinforce the regrettable notion that we have encouraged to the effect that national historic sites are little more than half-empty or half-full containers. What we should be asking instead is: How can national historic significance be communicated effectively without period reconstructions? For example, it seems to me that a place [Fort Langley] that served as the headquarters for Hudson's Bay Company operations in the Pacific Northwest was the site of the first salmon-packing operation in British Columbia, and the site where British Columbia was proclaimed a crown colony puts a challenge to our imaginations and to interpretation that reconstruction may simply not address.

To a degree, arguments against reconstruction are often considered to be a veiled attack on the interpretation function or on the need for interpretation itself. This is unfortunate. I sometimes think that we put so much *relative* emphasis on the needs of threatened resources and on the entertainment of visitors that we don't even ask the question of whether the average visitor leaves knowing (let alone knows beforehand) why the site he or she has just visited is one of only 750 places (out of literally millions of cultural heritage sites in this country) that have been recognized formally by the Government of Canada as national historic sites. I believe that the effective communication of national significance is the biggest challenge facing the interpretation function, if not CPS itself, over the next 10 years.

If one is going to do a reconstruction, then it goes without saying that one should do it as accurately as possible. But the old argument that we won't do a reconstruction if we don't have sufficient information to do it accurately has taken a twisted turn that has led us now to the point where the existence of accurate information is considered sufficient justification for a reconstruction, provided—of course—that funds are available. Budget rather than policy has become the determining factor. People in the specialist technical disciplines—not interpreters—are often the worst offenders (i.e., strongest proponents) here, dragging out arguments that make much of science and contributions to science.

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There is a wonderfully symbiotic relationship between "historical accuracy" and "reconstruction." Indeed, these are the two essential ingredients in what I sometimes regard as the closest humanity has come to producing a perpetual-motion machine. It is hard not to crack a smile after 22 years of working for National Historic Sites when one reads a proposal to the effect that **RESEARCH** (always in upper-case, boldface letters) has recently come up with new information that reveals that reconstructed or restored building "A" is not entirely accurate and that, in the interests of historical accuracy, changes should be made. It is harder still not to emit an audible chuckle if the identical situation has happened before. Now, I have a high regard for historical accuracy, but I think that the exigencies of historical accuracy may often better be respected by admitting that we got it wrong, but have decided to leave things as they are out of regard for the fact that the historical truth may not even yet have been revealed to us in all its majesty, and that an identified "mistake" may have a higher pedagogical value than a "possible or even probable" truth that is subject to change in the future. In fact, I can think of no better way of exposing the public to history and to the nature of our business than by pointing out where and why we got things wrong, and why we may never get them precisely right. What a wonderful interpretive device, one that does not discourage—indeed must not be allowed to discourage—the continuing search for accuracy, one that encourages the communication of the most up-to-date information, and yet one that does not put the entire burden for perceptions of accuracy on the site's physical fabric.

Closely related to the desire for "accuracy" is the desire for "authenticity." Much is made of authenticity by proponents of reconstruction. But Louisbourg does not stink, and the lawns at Fort Anne [Nova Scotia] and Fort George are mown (and fertilized) to aesthetic (not period) standards. Herein lies a major discrepancy in the so-called "authentic historic environment" arguments that are put up to justify reconstruction and animation (which is another form of reconstruction). Generally speaking, such environments are not historic at all: they are highly sanitized to correspond to peoples' expectations.

It is important to acknowledge that many proponents of reconstruction, particularly field people, are acting out of the highest "corporate" motivation of doing what's best for their sites (as expressed by enhanced profile, greater facilities and services development, increased visitation, etc.). CPS is now reaping the harvest of the corporate values it has practiced over the last three decades. If we honestly expect field people to take seriously the latest fashion, which can be described as "mildly anti-reconstructionist," then it is essential that they and their sites not be penalized in status or classification levels because they have fewer reconstructions than some other site. This is why it is important that superintendent positions at the Halifax Defence Complex and Dawson [Yukon Territory] be classified at the same level as Louisbourg.

There is an issue that has been raised at Fort Langley that merits discussion during this workshop. A perception has arisen in the last year or so that a building or structure can be added to a national historic site where it is required for operational purposes provided that the structure is not a reconstruction and cannot be confused with a reconstruction. Some people are, in my view legitimately, concerned that inappropriate, incompatible structures will be approved whereas those that evoke the past in a manner sensitive to the site will not. I think that consideration of this leads to one of the most interesting questions that was asked during the public consultations on the proposed policy: How does one determine when a national historic site or national park is "complete"? I invite you to contemplate the implications of that question and the reasons that may have led to the question. Simply stated, are we dealing with *Canadian Parks Service* sites or parks, or with *national* historic sites and *national* parks?

Finally, it seems to me that a large part of the attractiveness of reconstructed environments is that they possess a cultural landscape quality that has broad appeal. Louisbourg and Lunenburg [Nova Scotia], Upper Canada Village and Niagara-on-the-Lake, Village Québécois d'Antan and the Historic District of Québec City offer the same thing to the visitor — a relatively coherent cultural landscape. The only difference is that in the case of Louisbourg, Upper Canada Village, and Village d'Antan, one is visiting a re-creation and—in Northrop Frye's words—"confronting the past." There is another difference: people keep going back to Lunenburg, Niagara-on-the-Lake, and Québec City, which attract more visitors than the theme parks, while the operators of the theme parks are constantly trying to devise something new (or old?) to encourage people to return. Perhaps instead of trying to make each of our sites a cultural landscape in its own right, we should be putting the emphasis on how they fit into the larger cultural landscape around them.

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