

4-2011

# Cross-Cultural Perspectives Toward Historic Sacred Places

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### Recommended Citation

Levi, Daniel and Kocher, Sara (2011) "Cross-Cultural Perspectives Toward Historic Sacred Places," *Focus*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 8.

DOI: 10.15368/focus.2011v8n1.2

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/focus/vol8/iss1/8>

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# CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES TOWARD HISTORIC SACRED PLACES

DANIEL LEVI AND SARA KOCHER

*The authors discuss their comparative research that examines California Missions and Thai Buddhist wats as sacred places and their cultural meanings. The conflicts between religious and tourist uses are discussed and their implications for place identity and sacredness as well as for historic preservation and planning.*



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Within the noisy sprawl of Bangkok, there are islands of tranquility – the Buddhist *wats*. These places of worship are oases within the city; within the gates, the city becomes quiet. The wats are religious places, but they also serve the function of urban parks, community service and educational centers, and tourist sites. The beauty of these sacred places started our research on understanding the design, function, and psychology of these historic sacred sites.

Religious systems from primitive animism to modern religions like Christianity and Buddhism have created or identified sacred places (Jackson & Henrie, 1983). Sacredness has been used to describe a wide variety of types of places (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995). American sacred spaces discussed in the literature include historic sites and monuments, battlefields, churches, cemeteries, memorial museums, National Parks and other natural areas, and even baseball stadiums; however, most people view religious sites as the most sacred.

Historic sacred places help to provide meaning to a culture and a focus for community and religious activities (Bianca, 2001). Identifying these sites and understanding what is important to preserve about them is a vital component of historic and cultural preservation. Sacred sites also have economic value because both tourists and the local community use them (Bremmer, 2006). Managing conflicts between local religious use and tourism is a major concern.

Our research has examined Californian missions and Thai Buddhist *wats*, with methods that include phenomenological observations, interviews with tourists and Thai monks, and surveys of tourists and students. Student participation as researchers and place evaluators has been crucial to this work. This research has allowed us to develop a cross-cultural perspective of sacred places that has implications for planners.

We define sacred places as an experiential phenomenon, a behavior setting, and an aspect of place identity. These three definitions are not mutually exclusive; they are used together to understand why a place is considered sacred and to develop approaches to preserving sacred places. Our approach was developed from a Western, Christian, and anthropological perspective. Studying in Thailand gave us an opportunity to view sacred places from alternative perspectives. Thai Buddhism is a mixture of Theravada Buddhism and Folk Buddhism, which includes traditional religious beliefs (Chandngarm, 2005). In Thailand, both of these belief systems coexist and impact the design and use of historic sacred places.



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**Figure 1**  
*Dan and Sara in front of a Thai temple.*



## Experiential Definitions of Sacred Places

To most social scientists, sacredness is an experience that arises from people's interactions with a place (Carmichael, Hubert & Reeves, 1994). Like the perception of beauty, sacredness does not exist in the person or in the environment, but rather in the relationship between the two. The experience of sacredness exists only for those who are able to perceive why the place was delineated as sacred by the local culture (Shackley, 2001). Sacred places are designed to promote different types of religious experiences. Christian sacred places are designed to create an experience of awe, while Buddhist sacred places encourage an experience of respect, serenity, and immersion.

In Christian traditions, the experience of sacredness arises from a combination of awe and a religious symbol that helps to interpret its meaning. Awe is related to perceived vastness and the inability to assimilate the experience (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe-inspiring environmental features overwhelm the observer and create a sense of being a small part of a larger, spiritual system. Sacred places use a number of design features to encourage the experience of awe; for example, they often have a prominent center, strong verticalities that are oriented toward the sky, symmetries that demonstrate order and harmony, and a strong boundary between the sacred place and the profane outer world (Brill, 1994).

In Buddhist philosophy, sacredness is primarily a mental state, but the experience is influenced by the characteristics of the place. Thai *wats* are designed to encourage an experience of respect toward the Buddha and his teachings, and the experience of serenity that supports meditation and spiritual development. The experience of serenity is encouraged by the peaceful expression on the Buddha images, which physiologically triggers a relaxation response because humans mirror the emotional expressions of others (Iacoboni, 2009). The complex decorations of the temples create an overwhelming visual display that is perceptually relaxing, similar to the attention restoration response humans have in natural environments (Kaplan, 1995). For the Thai Folk Buddhists, the wats encourage an immersion experience that combines spirituality with celebration, which relates to their attitude of respect for spiritual forces.

## Behavior Setting Definitions of Sacred Places

Sacred places are behavior settings whose meaning arises from the behaviors that occur there; the uses and religious practices make the place sacred. Sacred places provide meaning, support, and a context for performing religious activities (Rapoport, 1982). The meaningfulness of the place arises from its uses by people, while the place helps to structure the social relationships and activities (Bremer, 2006).

In Christianity, any place where people gather to conduct religious services becomes a sacred place during the religious activities (Bible, Matthew 18:20). In this sense, the church is not a building, but the place where religious activities occur. This idea that sacredness is defined by the use of a place is included in the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (Hughes & Swan, 1986). According to the law, sacred areas are places where Native Americans have traditionally performed religious activities.

**Figure 2**  
Wat Chedi Luang, Chiang  
Mai, Thailand.



From a Buddhist perspective, the behaviors that define wats include community functions such as education and social services, religious functions such as meditation and religious ceremonies, and places where the Sangha (community of monks) live. The community members who use the *wats*, the monks who live there, and the tourists who visit participate in these activities. The opportunity to observe monks and community members engaging in religious practices is an important part of the experience of sacredness for tourists (Levi & Kocher, 2008).

### Sacredness as an Aspect of Place Identity

Sacredness is an aspect of place identity --the meanings and feelings associated with a place by a group of people (Hague, 2005). It can become linked to a place's identity in a variety of ways. It may be viewed as an inherent characteristic of the place because of the presence of spiritual forces: religions can consecrate places to make them sacred; and historic events and artifacts may cause a place to become viewed as sacred.

Many traditional cultures believe that sacredness is directly attached to a place (Bianca, 2001). For example, pantheists believe that the earth in its entirety is sacred and everything that exists is part of an interconnected unity that is divine (Levine, 2007). This view is held by many traditional cultures such as Native Americans, non-theistic religions such as Taoism and certain forms of Buddhism, and environmentalist philosophy. Although traditional cultures may view all of the earth as sacred, they do recognize certain places where the spirit power manifests itself more clearly (Hubert, 1994).

Christian religions declare or consecrate places as sacred (Vukonic,2006). Religious authorities sanctify these places, and they can be deconsecrated through rituals if no longer in use. Both Christians and Buddhists recognize that historic religious sites can become sacred due to an event that occurred there (such as a miracle) or the presence of sacred relics and religious icons. Places may be viewed as sacred or "charged" because of the religious or spiritual symbols presented by the environment (Brill, 1994). These symbols may be culturally determined (i.e. crucifix, Buddha image), or there may be universal spiritual symbols such as archetypes or certain natural features.

### Implications

This cross-cultural analysis of historic sacred places has important implications for planners concerned with historic preservation, the maintenance of religious practices and community services, and managing the conflicts between tourism and the local community.

The experiential perspective shows the range of emotional experiences related to sacred places. Sacred places are awe-inspiring; they are serene environments that encourage contemplation and meditation; and they create an attitude of respect toward religious values. Preserving the sense of awe at historic sacred



**Figure 3**  
*Buddha sculpture and monk, in the historic town of Sukotai, Thailand.*



**Figure 4**  
*Ritual offerings in Wat Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai, Thailand.*



**Figure 5**  
Tourist use of the plaza  
and the San Luis Obispo  
Mission. (photo V. del Rio)

places requires preservation of the building and management of its use by tourists. Overcrowding and inappropriate tourist behavior disrupts people's experience of place. Maintaining serenity requires limiting disruptions caused by tourists and managing noise and disruptions from adjacent uses to the site. Respect relates to how the place is interpreted --whether it is presented as a tourist attraction, a historic site, or a religious place-- and informing tourists about culturally appropriate behaviors.

The behavior setting perspective makes clear the importance of preserving both the historic structure and the religious practices in order to maintain the sacredness of the place. Although tourists highly value being able to observe and participate in religious practices, their presence can be disruptive to the local community of religious practitioners. At the California

missions, tourists are often excluded from areas when religious services are occurring, while the Thai Buddhists encourage local and foreign tourists to observe and participate in religious rituals.

Preserving sacredness as part of place identity relates to the continued religious use of a site. When religious practices stop occurring, the place identity shifts from being a sacred to historic place. Tourist interpretation is also a factor. At many California missions, the place is interpreted as a historic site, even when it is still being used for religious services. In Thailand, historic Buddhist *wats* are interpreted as primarily sacred sites and tourists are encouraged to engage in religious rituals and talk about religion with monks. However, the biggest impact on place identity relates to commercialization within and surrounding the historic site. Too much tourist-oriented commercial development transforms the site from a historic sacred place to a tourist attraction.

## Conclusion

Historic sacred places are valuable community assets. They help to encourage spiritual growth, provide a focal point for the community, and are an economic attractor due to tourism. A cross-cultural perspective shows the variety of experiences, behaviors, and identities that create sacred places. This perspective helps to identify some of the challenges planners face trying to preserve these important community assets.

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