

# Attitudes Toward Preservation and Management of Historic Religious Sites: A Study of Three Missions in California

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*The public meaning and the appropriate social uses of historical sites are fundamental for their preservation. Levi and del Rio discuss the results of an attitude survey of three California Missions. The respondents' perception their authenticity, the appropriateness of their uses, and the acceptance of modifications have important implications for planning and management.*

One way to foster communication with the public about the preservation and use of historic environments is to use attitude surveys to understand the public's perceptions and beliefs. This project examined public attitudes toward the meaning and perception of historic environments, the appropriate social uses of these environments, and the acceptability of modifications to the environments. Surveys examined attitudes toward three California missions with widely different histories, physical characteristics, and social uses: Mission San Luis Obispo, Mission San Miguel, and Mission La Purisima. Surveys examined the perception of authenticity, historic value and sacredness of the sites; the appropriateness of tourist, educational, and religious uses of the sites; and the acceptability of modifications for ADA accessibility, earthquake protection, and tourist services. The results of the attitude surveys have implications for the management of these historic environments.

## Introduction

Historic preservation often focuses on preserving the physical features of sites; it is a materialist perspective that emphasizes entities and their origins (Jones, 2010).

Authenticity is viewed as an objective and measurable attribute inherent in the material of monuments and sites. The constructivist perspective toward historic preservation believes authenticity is a culturally constructed quality that varies depending on who is observing and in what contexts (Jones, 2010). It depends on the cultural meaning and value of the object. From this perspective, people experience

authenticity as relationships between people, places, and things, not the things in themselves.

Many preservationist scholars advocate that community input should be included in decisions about historic preservation not only because community engagement is fundamental for the decision-making and implementation processes, but also because preservation needs to deal with the dynamics between the material fabric and community culture (Wells, 2010). Community members may perceive different degrees of importance in preservation features. The environmental context of historic sites and the social functions of the places are important factors in establishing authenticity. Authenticity should be judged within the cultural context it belongs, so community members should play a role in decisions about historic preservation.

## Authenticity & Perceived Authenticity

Authenticity is an important concept in both historic preservation and tourism. There is an important distinction between historical authenticity (or the way experts in historic preservation define authenticity) and perceived authenticity (or the public's perceptions and beliefs about what is authentic). For historic preservationists, authenticity is used to make decisions about which places should be preserved and the acceptability of modifications to the place (Wells, 2010). Historic preservationists use multiple definitions of authenticity to evaluate places; however, the most common definition focuses on the physical dimensions – are the historic structures and artifacts intact or have they been changed over time. Preservationists may also

consider whether the historical uses or functions continue (McKercher & du Cros, 2002).

For tourists, perceived authenticity is a criterion for the selection and evaluation of the cultural tourism sites they visit (Shackley, 2001). Perceived authenticity focuses on the factors that influence why people experience a place as authentic. Tourists want to visit authentic sites, but they may not have the knowledge or ability to know whether a place is historically authentic (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). The California missions provide an excellent example of the challenges of evaluating the perceived authenticity of a place.

Perceived authenticity relates to both the characteristics of the site and the visitors (Levi, 2012). Like historic authenticity, perceived authenticity relates to the physical characteristics of the place, the context of the site, and its current social uses. The California missions were once rural, agricultural places, but today many are in urban environments that change one's perception of them. Although many of the California missions have active religious parishes, some—such as Mission La Purísima—are primarily historic tourism sites. The way the place is interpreted to visitors also influences its perceived authenticity (Bremmer, 2000). Interpretation tells visitors whether the site is primarily a historic, tourist, or religious place.

The cultural background and other characteristics of the visitors impact perceived authenticity and their ability to interpret historic sites (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). For example, non-Christian visitors may have difficulty interpreting the meaning of religious symbols at the California missions. Knowledge of the site's history affects people's evaluations of it. People are not always able to tell whether a building is a historic or modern construction (Levi, 2005). For example, most visitors are unaware that the current chapel at Mission San Luis Obispo was built in the 1930s. Tourists also vary on the motivation for their visit, and the perception of a mission depends on whether one is visiting as a tourist or a religious pilgrimage (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). Finally, perceived authenticity is influenced by the experience when visiting the site: visiting Mission San Luis Obispo is a different experience if the visitor arrives during a religious service versus a "Concerts in the Plaza" event.

### **Missions as Hybrid Places**

The California missions are hybrid environments that are historic, religious and tourist places (Levi & Kocher, 2009). Historic sacred places help to provide meaning to a culture and a focus for community and religious activities (Bianca, 2001). Understanding what is important to preserve about them is a vital component of historic preservation. Preserving cultural heritage at religious sites requires allowing the local community

to continue using the site; however, religious practices can be disrupted by the presence of tourists (Shackley, 2001).

Both tourists and the local community value historic religious sites, but the managing of conflict between local religious use and tourism is a significant concern (Bremmer, 2006). Inappropriate tourist activities and commercial development in and around a religious heritage site can degrade its perceived authenticity (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). At many of the missions, there are attempts to separate church services from tourist activities (Bremer, 2000). Interpretation for the tourists at the missions primarily focuses on their role in history.

### **Sacredness**

The California missions are historic religious sites that are experienced as sacred places by the community and visitors. Experiencing these historic religious sites as sacred places that are used by the local community is an integral part of the tourist experience. The sacredness of a place can be fundamentally seen as an experiential phenomenon, a behavior setting, or an aspect of place identity (Levi & Kocher, 2013).

To most social scientists, sacredness is an experiential phenomenon that arises from people's interactions with a place (Carmichael, Hubert, & Reeves, 1994). Sacredness does not exist in the person or the environment, but rather in the relationship between the two. The experience of sacredness is often described as a feeling of awe when being in the place. This sacred experience may exist only for those who can perceive why the place was delineated as sacred by the local culture (Shackley, 2001).

Sacred places can be seen as behavior settings whose meaning arises from the religious practices being performed there. Sacred places provide meaning, support, and a context for performing religious activities (Rapaport, 1982). The meaningfulness of the place arises from its religious use, while the place helps to structure the social relationships and activities (Bremer, 2006). This perspective makes clear the importance of preserving both the historic structure and the religious practices in order to maintain the sacredness of the place.

Sacredness is an aspect of a place's identity or the meanings and feelings associated with a place by a group of people (Hague, 2005). Sacredness may be viewed as a characteristic of the place because of the presence of spiritual forces, religions can consecrate places to make them sacred, and historic events may cause a place to become viewed as sacred by the community. All of these factors relate to the California missions.

However, the continued religious use of a site is essential for preserving the experience of sacredness (Levi & Kocher, 2011). When religious practices stop occurring, the place's identity

shifts from being a sacred to historic place. Many California missions are interpreted as a historic site, even when it is still being used for religious services. However, the most significant impact on place identity relates to commercialization at the historic site. Too much tourist-oriented commercial development transforms the site from a historic sacred place to a tourist attraction.

### Conflicts among Uses

Managing historic religious sites requires the balancing of community religious use with tourism, education, and religious tourism. The California missions are valued for religious, historic, and tourist reasons; however, these three goals can create conflicts among the uses (Shackley, 2001). The preservation of a historic site can conflict with its use by the religious community and tourists. If no one visited a historic site, it would be easier to preserve; but use by the local community and tourists provides the social and financial support for its maintenance (Olsen, 2006). The local religious community may want to modify or modernize a place to support their use, which can conflict with a focus on historic preservation.

Tourism creates a dilemma for the preservation and management of historic religious sites. Although it provides a compelling political and economic justification for site conservation, inappropriate use, increased visitation, and commercialization are threats to the site's integrity (Levi & Kocher, 2009). As tourists can disrupt religious activities, historic religious sites develop different strategies for managing these intrusions (Bremmer, 2006). However, local religious communities do not reject tourism because they are proud of their heritage and recognize that tourism provides an economic incentive for preservation. It seems that these two domains can co-exist as long as there is a clear demarcation between religious (sacred rituals) and profane (worldly activities).

Continued use of heritage religious sites is important for both the tourists and the local community (Levi & Kocher, 2009). Religious use by the local community provides meaning to the site and supports preservation and maintenance. Although tourists seek authentic experiences, commercialization occurs because the tourist industry tries to make the sites more comfortable for visitors, and maximize earnings. Gift shops, food, and other tourist commodities and services may be provided at the heritage site or in adjacent areas. Tourists have a mixed view of this commercialization, but often see it as incompatible with the religious experience of heritage sites.

### Community Attitudes and Historic Preservation

Historic preservation requires making decisions about which and how historic sites should be preserved, used, and modified.

Professionals with expertise in historic preservation serve an important role in doing this, but it is also essential to include the community in the decision process because they are users of the sites and their support is needed for implementation. One way to include the community opinion in the historic preservation process is through the use of attitude surveys of community members and visitors.

There are a variety of benefits to studying the attitudes of community members and visitors to historic sites. Attitude surveys provide a way of capturing the public's perceptions of authenticity and their beliefs about how the historic sites should be managed. They can help to document the importance of historic preservation and identify the factors associated to the sites, show the public's view of appropriate uses and acceptable alterations, and demonstrate community and political support for their preservation and maintenance.

This research project was interested in understanding the public's perception of historic preservation, uses, and modifications of California historic Missions. We chose three missions with significant differences in their history and use: San Luis Obispo, San Miguel, and La Purisima. Students at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, were surveyed representing the public's views.

### Methods

The survey was developed so that it could examine the importance of historic preservation and the factors related to it, the appropriateness of the uses in the historic sites, and the acceptability of modifications to the sites, besides collecting background information (age, gender, major, and whether participants had visited the site).

The three historic missions examined in this study are located along the California Central Coast, about one hour's drive apart from each other. The participants in the study were given descriptions of the three missions at the beginning of the survey describing their history and current use. These descriptions and the attitude ratings were randomly presented to the survey participants in different orders; no photos accompanied the descriptions. The missions were described in the following manner:

"Mission San Luis Obispo is in downtown SLO. The mission has been extensively rebuilt and modified over the years. In the late 1800s, it was modernized after damage from an earthquake. In the 1930s the main chapel was reconstructed in a historic style with reinforced concrete, and its interior was redesigned ten years ago in a non-historic style. The Catholic parish is active in the historic buildings and religious services occur regularly in the church. The complex holds a small gift shop and museum next to the church's



main entrance. In front of the mission, a plaza built by the City in the 1970s is used for community events."

"Mission San Miguel is located on the outskirts of the town of San Miguel. Its church is one of the least modified and best historically preserved of the California missions and contains original Native American and Spanish artwork from the early 1800s. Because of nearby railroad tracks and an earthquake over a decade ago, the church's adobe walls are in fragile condition although they have recently been reinforced. The local Catholic parish uses some of the historic buildings, but most parish activities occur in a modern building adjacent to the site. There are a small gift shop and museum."

"Mission La Purisima is located in a rural area near Lompoc. An earthquake destroyed the original mission in the 1800s, and the National Park Service started reconstruction in the 1930s. Based on the original mission, the reconstruction used a historically appropriate style, materials, tools and methods. The mission complex includes agricultural fields, farm buildings, workshops, residences, and other structures that would have existed at the mission in the 1700s. Because of its rural setting, the existing complex captures the historic atmosphere of a mission and showcases how it may have operated. It is currently a State Historic Park."

The surveys were distributed in City and Regional Planning (CRP) and General Education (GE) classes at Cal Poly during the fall of 2015 and winter of 2016 (see Appendix for Survey template). The sample included 119 students, 31% of them were CRP students while 69% were GE students. The students ranged in age from 17 to 36, with a mean of 21. Women were 61% of the sample, while men were 39%.

The survey contained fifteen questions about the value of historic preservations, factors related to it, uses of historic sites, and the acceptability of modifications to the sites. The survey items used 5-point rating scales from 1 (not at all) to 5 (highly). Tables showing percent agreement include the number of agree (4) and highly agree (5) responses on the 5-point rating scales. The surveys were analyzed using the SPSS statistical program and, for analyses of variance and correlations, a probability of less than .001 was considered significant.

## Results

The student participants' beliefs about the historic authenticity, sacredness and the importance of historic preservation of the missions are presented in Table 1. Mission San Miguel was viewed as more historically authentic than the other two Missions ( $F(2, 101) = 28.88, p < .001$ ). Missions San Luis Obispo



Figure 1: Mission San Luis Obispo. (photo V. del Rio)



Figure 2: Mission San Miguel. (photo V. del Rio)



Figure 3: Mission La Purisima. (photo courtesy of Earl C. Leatherberry)

and San Miguel were viewed as more religious or sacred places than Mission La Purisima ( $F(2, 101) = 17.18, p < .001$ ). Historic preservation was viewed as more important for Missions San Miguel and San Luis Obispo than Mission La Purisima ( $F(2, 101) = 18.89, p < .001$ ).

Overall, historic preservation of the missions was viewed as important by the majority of the participants. Mission San Miguel was viewed as the most historically authentic site and historic preservation was viewed as most important there.

The participants were asked about the appropriateness of various uses of the missions (see Table 2). With one exception, the majority of the participants felt that religious use, educational use, and tourism were all appropriate uses. The exception was that religious use was considered less appropriate at Mission La Purisima than the other two missions ( $F(2, 101) = 11.75, p < .001$ ). This is likely because Mission La Purisima is a California State historic park and does not have an active community parish.

Ratings of the acceptability of modifications to the missions are presented in Table 3. Most of the participants believed that modifications for ADA accessibility and earthquake resistance were acceptable. These modifications were viewed as less acceptable for Mission San Miguel than the other two Missions (ADA  $F(2, 101) = 11.27, p < .001$ ; earthquake resistance  $F(2, 101) = 10.35, p < .001$ ). Modifications to add educational facilities were viewed as acceptable by over half of the participants at all of the missions. Modifications to add tourist facilities was not viewed as acceptable by most of the participants, especially for Mission San Miguel ( $F(2, 101) = 11.11, p < .001$ ). When modifications are made to the missions, most of the participants felt that the changes should be historic looking, rather than modern.

Correlations with the importance of historic preservation are presented in Table 4. Perceived historic authenticity and sacredness significantly correlated with attitudes about the importance of historic preservation. The relationship between perceived authenticity and the importance of historic preservation is especially strong. The more the mission was viewed as an authentic or sacred place, the more important participants believed that historic preservation of the place was.

Support for historic preservation was positively correlated with support for the use of the missions for religious, education and tourism purposes. Again, results for Mission La Purisima were different because as a state historic park it is already a tourist facility. Views of the appropriateness of educational and tourism uses of the missions were highly correlated with each other for all of the missions. In other words, education and tourism were viewed as compatible uses of the missions, along

with the community's religious use. However, the development of tourist facilities at the missions was negatively correlated with the importance of historic preservation for Missions San Miguel and La Purisima. Because Mission San Luis Obispo is located in the tourist-oriented downtown of San Luis Obispo, the development of tourist facilities was viewed as compatible with historic preservation.

Several background variables were analyzed to see their relationship to attitudes about historic preservation of the missions. The only significant differences between the CRP and GE students were that CRP students were more positive about the development of tourist facilities at Missions San Luis Obispo and San Miguel (San Luis Obispo  $t(117) = 2.65, p < .01$ ; San Miguel  $t(117) = 3.75, p < .001$ ).

Most of the student participants had visited Mission San Luis Obispo (88%), while relatively few of them had visited Mission San Miguel (17%) and La Purisima (21%). In all cases, those who did visit the missions rated historic preservation as more important than non-visitors. This was a significant difference for Mission San Luis Obispo ( $t(117) = 3.19, p < .002$ ) and Mission San Miguel ( $t(101) = 3.7, p < .001$ ), but not for Mission La Purisima. There were no significant differences between visitors and non-visitors on the other survey questions.

## Conclusions

The results of this study showed that the participants have strong support for historic preservation of the California missions. The importance of historic preservation was positively related to whether the site was perceived as authentic and sacred. Perceived authenticity was related to more support for historic preservation, but less support for the modifications to the historic sites. Education, tourism, and continued community religious activity were viewed as appropriate uses for the missions. Modifications to the historic missions were acceptable for many reasons, except for the development of tourist facilities. Mission visitors were more supportive of historic preservation than non-visitors.

There are valuable insights about the preservation and management of these missions that showed that the public has different views depending on the site. For Mission San Luis Obispo, tourist development around the mission was viewed as appropriate in this tourist-oriented downtown. The public sees no conflict between the town's tourist orientation and the historic and religious uses of the mission. Mission San Miguel was viewed as the most historically authentic and the most in need for historic preservation. Even here, there was support for continued religious, educational, and tourist uses of the mission. Mission La Purisima was valued as a historically authentic

site by many. However, it was seen as less in need of historic preservation than the other sites. This may be because it is already in a state historic park that guarantees this protection.

This study demonstrates the value of using attitude surveys to help guide historic preservation activities. The results show widespread support for historic preservation and help to understand the public's perception of authenticity at the sites. For the participants in this study, perceived authenticity was related to the historic material characteristics of the site, the current functions or uses of the site, and the environmental context of the site. Public attitudes also help to identify appropriate uses of the sites and the acceptability of different types of modifications.

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