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Historic Preservation as a Representation of National Identity:
The Cases of Colonial Williamsburg and Old San Juan

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**Historic Preservation as a Representation of National Identity and the Tourist Industry: The Cases of Old San Juan and Colonial Williamsburg**

Historic preservation is important for many reasons, but particularly for the purpose of preserving moments in history and built representations of cultures. When looking at the case of preservation in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico and colonial cities in the United States—specifically Colonial Williamsburg—it can be seen that choices of preservation say a lot about the sense of national identity promoted by these two historic cities. However, the difference is that while Old San Juan strategically uses many of the extant historic buildings of the city for productive cultural experiences tied to the tourist economy, Colonial Williamsburg, also using many of the historic buildings on site, instead draws more attention to certain historic activities instead of the history of the buildings and the sites themselves. This dynamic represents how architecture and historic preservation are directly tied to sense of national identity and how the connection between the two can be manipulated in order to portray a certain image about the origins of culture in these nations as well as to build a successful tourist economy.

The comparison between these two cities proves to be interesting because of the nature of Puerto Rico’s colonial history. Originally a Spanish colony, Puerto Rico has evolved as a predominantly Spanish-speaking island, which is somewhat unique compared to its fellow Caribbean islands in the West Indies (with the exception of the Dominican Republic and Cuba). Although Puerto Rico was taken over by the United States in 1889, the legacy of its Spanish heritage has carried through to present day. This can particularly be seen in Old San Juan, as opposed to the rest of San Juan, which has been
completely dominated by resorts and other tourist attractions. Old San Juan, while still highly trafficked by tourists uses its many historic buildings as cultural and political centers, which architecturally represent the Spanish colonial legacy. The Spanish aesthetics might represent the heritage and cultural identity of the island; however, Puerto Rico is still an American Territory. Many Puerto Ricans, while enjoying some of the benefits (travel accessibility and certain government based amenities) that come along with being an American citizen still push away any cultural ties to the United States, and continue to actively connect with their Spanish legacy.

In contrast, the United States does a lot to hold true to its roots as a self-founded democratic nation, and many cities on the east coast have developed as historic representations of these roots. Colonial Williamsburg is one of a few examples of living history museums that devote themselves to giving visitors the experience of living in eighteenth century America. However, the built environment for these activities, while based on colonial structures, is not entirely authentic. Extant historic buildings are located in many areas of the city, mainly at the College of William and Mary, which is adjacent to the city's main street, where the majority of attractions and activities are held. These buildings are shadowed by the interactive historic activities taking place in the city and merely provide a physical environment for the activities to exist.

By first examining the national identity and legacy of these two colonial territories in a historic context, and the means of historic preservation and reactions to this type of architectural practice, it will be shown how historic legacies and preservation projects combined, can express a sense of cultural identity and how this identity is linked to the intentions behind the decisions made in terms of the built environment.
Part One: National Identity

National Identity in Puerto Rico

National identity is complex in nature and definition. National identity can transcend the borders of a region and encompass cultural groups and individuals who have evolved as products of the same histories, experiences, oppressions, etc. In the cases of Puerto Rico and the United States, national identity derives from and manifests itself in very different ways. While both places were initially under colonial rule, the manifestation of national identity has evolved in significantly different ways, and therefore the physical expression of both regions has evolved differently as well. Looking first at Puerto Rico as a product of Spanish Colonialism, and then at the United States as an icon of freedom and as a model of antiquity—in terms of architecture—comparisons about the sense of national identity that have been adopted by both locations will be made. The sense of identity that Puerto Rico and the United States have taken on designates the appearance of their built environments, and how specific historic cities such as Old San Juan and Colonial Williamsburg have chosen to preserve this identity through historic architecture.

Puerto Rico is a complicated region when it comes to exploring national identity. Colonized by the Spanish around 1508, “The case of Puerto Rico is distinctive because of its persistent colonial status.”¹ The legacy of Hispanic pride and culture has evolved but still exists prominently today, despite Puerto Rico becoming as American territory in April 1898. A major part of Puerto Rican identity over the past century and a half has developed from an anti-American standpoint that further pushes the desire to express

the Spanish heritage that uniquely bonds the people of the island through a common history and adversity experienced during the development of the island. Puerto Ricans view the imposition of the United States as “Founding as many cities as possible and by erasing any previous establishments. The same transformation and superimposition still happens today with the individualistic interest of the capitalist and the international interest of imperialism from other countries.”

Discouraged by the clear lack of respect the United States had displayed toward the native cultures of their colonial territories, Puerto Ricans continue to push against the constant political impositions and ideals of United States government that inherently exist.

Along with the imposition of political systems, Puerto Ricans feel smothered by the United States cultural impositions that come with being an American territory. As discussed by Jorge Duane in his analysis of Puerto Rican migration to the United States and the island’s Hispanic legacy in terms of national identity in “Nation on the Move,” “The Current intellectual discussion on national identity in Puerto Rico is still framed largely in Pedreira’s terms. Now, as then, scholars, writers and artists feel threatened by the Americanization of Puerto Rican culture through the school curriculum, the mass media, and the massive Protestant ‘penetration’ of popular religiosity.” With the effects of Americanization on the creative and educational worlds, Puerto Ricans look for ways in which to pull from their own culture and experiences to make their understanding of “Puerto Ricanness” prevalent among other Puerto Ricans—both those who live in Puerto Rico, and those who have migrated to the mainland United States—especially the

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younger generation. “Native intellectuals have sought to regenerate the moral fabric of the nation as an organizing principle in the daily lives of the people.” This state of mind has also transcended class boundaries.

While general distaste for American democratic and capitalist policies is prevalent in Puerto Rico, there is also the issue of class divide. As in the United States where the rich succeed and the poor struggle all in the name of the capitalist venture, a similar dynamic exists in Puerto Rico. “Moreover, the dominant representations of Puerto Ricanness are no longer confined to an intellectual elite, the petty Bourgeoisie, or the pro-independence movement. Rather, popular icons of national identity (such as the omnipresent flag or salsa music) have filtered down, sprung from the bottom up, or recirculated through the Island’s class structure.” The mission of the population is to express its existence as a nation by default. Although not an independent country, the only American elements that Puerto Rican people seem to support are some of the social policies and easy access to the mainland United States. Even so, many are strongly against the political impositions by the American government.

Puerto Ricans have based their identity on their Spanish legacy, which provides a common ground for the island to exist as its own entity. Linking the population through a common language separates Puerto Ricans culturally from the United States. Duane supports this when stating:

First, the Spanish language is considered the cornerstone of Puerto Ricanness, as opposed to English, which is typically viewed as corrupting influence on vernacular....Fourth, the shared history of a Spanish heritage, indigenous roots, and African influences offers a strong resistance to U.S.

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5 Ibid, 9-10.
assimilation. Fifth, local culture—especially folklore—provides an invaluable source of popular images and artifacts that are counterposed to images of U.S. culture, avoiding unwanted mixtures.\textsuperscript{6}

Using these entities of Spanish culture, Puerto Ricans are trying to perpetuate their independence of culture and simultaneously demonstrate their deterrence from adhering to the United States in any way other than politically.

The legacy of Puerto Rico transcends the identity of the Spanish Colony. The people of Puerto Rico—both indigenous and Spanish colonial—had to travel through a history of aggressive colonization as one of many Spanish sugar production bases in the Caribbean. The island then immediately transitioned to combating the United States from “implanting a new and alien world view centered on the prevailing myths of the American experience, but completely divorced from the historical context of the Puerto Rican people’s lived experiences.”\textsuperscript{7} Many Puerto Ricans have moved beyond the island to the mainland, and have brought their culture to many cities and neighborhoods where natives of the island and their descendants now reside. However, the physical representation of Spanish heritage is most strongly seen in the built environment of the island itself.

Upon entering Old San Juan, a section of the capital city, one does not feel as though they are still in America. Although areas are filled with tourists and cruise ships, the city’s built environment and the Spanish-speaking locals reflect the felt identity of the island. When walking around, the large fortifications and open plazas are a reminder of the original heritage of the island, which the majority of Puerto Ricans today choose to

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, 11.
identify with. “The Island also possesses many of the symbolic attributes of a nation, such as a national system of universities, museums, and other cultural institutions; a national tradition in literature and the visual arts; and even a national representation in international sports and beauty contests.”\(^8\) Clearly Puerto Rico has found many ways in which to divorce itself culturally from the United States. Old San Juan is a testament to this in its ability to rehabilitate historic structures and architectural styles to promote the history of the island. The use of architecture in this city is strategic in its purpose to educate tourists and hold true to the identity that Puerto Rico has adopted.

*National Identity in the United States*

In the case of the United States, national identity takes on a different form, while equally, if not more complex, than that of Puerto Rico. Founded on a system of democracy in 1776 after British Colonial rule, the United States has grown to become a world power. After growing dramatically in geographic size and population since its founding, the United States is often referred to as a “Nation of nations.”\(^9\) In *Public History and National Identity in the United States*, Michael Kammen goes into great depth about the evolution of national identity in the United States. He credits a lot of the Nation’s identity to written history and journals and how it has changed as the country has expanded. As national identity has become ever more challenging to explain in terms of the United States, Kammen points out that,

> We have, therefore, what might be called a dichotomy of nostalgias: negative nostalgia among those who believe that national identity has

\(^8\) Duane, “Nation on the move,” 8.

suffered from serious loss of precious cohesion, counterbalanced by affirmative nostalgia for those who have seized the opportunity to rediscover long-lost relationships between history and identity – relationships that require a coordination of allegiances that is not easy when policy initiatives alienate and certain publications reveal that one group does not sufficiently respect the multi-faceted identity that another group fancies for itself.\(^{10}\)

As the United States has expanded, so has its cultural identity. Kammen points out the dramatic shift just from the 1800s to the mid-twentieth century. Specifically, he notes that there “appears a shift from a national emphasis in 1876 to a more local, Communitarian one in 1976” as during this century the influx of immigrants was most exponential.\(^{11}\) Now that United States is an amalgamation of ethnicities and legacies, the stories and histories of the population as a whole are innumerable. Expressing identity is not as concrete as a dominant religion or language anymore, or as it seems to be in Puerto Rico.

Even more so, the expressions of identity seen through media, art, and literature are so diverse and sometimes biased that it is nearly impossible to give a concrete description of the identity of the United States as a nation over the course of its existence. Instead, one might argue that the identity of the nation would be perceived differently at different points during its history, and depending upon who is telling the story. “[Public history] in the United States, has been done for the people and of the people, but not very often by the people.”\(^{12}\) This clearly provides a skewed interpretation of what the identity of the United States truly is.

The question now becomes: how does the United States express its own identity?

\(^{10}\) Ibid, 461.
\(^{11}\) Ibid, 470.
\(^{12}\) Ibid, 466.
Puerto Ricans have found ways to incorporate their sense of national pride and identity into their environment both culturally and physically. However, it becomes extremely complex when looking to educate Americans on the heritage of the country. Approaches can be taken from a Colonial, or traditional nationalistic standpoint, demonstrating the adversity of becoming and developing as a cohesive, democratic state. Americans can also identify with the turn of the twentieth century, when the United States stood as a haven, open to new immigrants, or explore more contemporary times when America showed fear of certain regions during the Cold War, and even the current phobias surrounding the Middle East. The United States has taken on the role as an imposing force, while still trying to portray itself as a melting pot, the land with “streets of gold” that it was once thought of by many on the outside.

There are numerous outlets for nationalistic cultural expression by the United States, in museums, artwork, and literature. However, “at a time when public interest in history appears to be high, but actual knowledge of history is sadly low, historic societies are increasingly emphasizing their roles as museums – places of handsome display rather than places of inquiry and interpretation fulfilling an educational function.” Therefore, when choosing how to display the heritage of the United States, the content becomes less educational and more about attraction and creating a specific image instead of encouraging curiosity about the complexities that exist in the context of the foundation of the United States. Freedom and democracy are often accepted as the poster images of the birth of America. However, the means by which America was founded and the legacies they have created seem to come in second to the surface image of American history.

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13 Ibid, 467.
In an attempt to create a portrait of American cultural identity, many lean on Colonial America, as the birthplace of the superpower that the United States has become. The images of Colonial times represent a sense of adversity and proactivity in the creation of the democratic and utilitarian qualities the nation has grown to promote. As colonial Americans “foraged the components of democratic government, the founders also created a new architecture to express their revolutionary vision of society.” Colonial architecture has been used to perpetuate the image of democracy, and “as cultural tourism’ continues to develop rapidly in the United States (and elsewhere), for example, cities, states, and regions make all sorts of claims about their ‘heritage’ and historic traditions.” The United States has found many sites to display the Colonial heritage of the Nation, creating exciting and memorable consumer experiences that use historic structures as a backdrop instead of a more in depth education, such as Colonial Williamsburg, Plimoth Plantation, Monticello, Gettysburg, Mount Vernon, Jamestown and others.

Colonial Williamsburg is a main hub for “Nationalistic” tourism in the United States. The city is the home to the College of William and Mary and has a historic downtown section, which poses as an artificial representation of Colonial life in the United States. While the actions and activities of the living history museum are meant to emulate a historic lifestyle, it neglects to adequately incorporate the built environment of the city, which in reality has more historic value than the amusement park-esque atmosphere that turns colonial life into a fun and interactive showcase. The city stands as

15 Kammen, “Public History,” 473.
a representation of how the United States chooses to portray its identity through the built environment, and therefore promotes the idea of attraction and consumerism as a part of its identity by default. In comparison to Old San Juan, it can be argued that the way in which a nation, or region, approaches the representation of its identity has a direct effect on the preservation of certain aspects of the built environment. Representation of culture and identity can be seen through the preservation process and intent, as well as the function of these environments. Also, the ways in which a nation views itself and chooses to promote itself can be identified through the preservation process as well.
Part Two: Historic Preservation

Architecture, as well as other forms of art and self-expression, is important to understanding and piecing together a complete contextual history of specific locations throughout different time periods. In order to understand certain events, daily activities and even political and social standpoints from the past, the built environment plays an important role. Historic preservation is an integral component in the expression of history, and the choices behind preservation projects indicate a community or region’s desired image of a place or time period. By exploring historic preservation in San Luis Obispo, California and in areas of New England, it is made clear that nationalist viewpoints and certain aesthetic desires drive preservation projects. These cases stand as evidence behind the mentality of preservation at Colonial Williamsburg which uses architecture to create a history that encompasses more that just the built environment, and emulates a small fraction of what American history and identity entails. In juxtaposition, preservation stories in Old San Juan provide a glimpse into the island’s desire to create a historically accurate and educational experience that represents the nation as a whole.

A large part of historic preservation is based solely on aesthetics. By preserving old structures, a feeling of a certain place and time is also preserved. In cases such as that of San Luis Obispo, California, where new structures are integrated into historic and even “fake historic” buildings, the public perception of aesthetics are important. “The construction of fake historic architecture has expanded throughout America. Malls, shopping centers, theme parks, and even downtowns have been designed to mimic
historical periods.”16 Because the importance of creating a historic aesthetic has become so prevalent, many of these “fake” historic environments, including Colonial Williamsburg, are meant to stand as showpieces, bringing glamour and awe to historic styles. “The popularity of this style of architecture with tourists and upscale urban residents has encouraged its proliferation.”17 Popularizing historic architecture demonstrates the emphasis on historic architecture as a commercial entity, as opposed to an educational tool. Not only does this create a false sense of national history but its use demonstrates the part of American identity that strongly attaches itself to promoting self image through economic endeavors.

Examining the results of a study performed in San Luis Obispo, it can be seen that tourists’ preferences were taken into account when designing the aesthetic and functional aspects of the downtown area. “When the historic character of a downtown is preserved, the downtown may become a tourist attraction that enhances the local economy and the sense of community pride. Preserving both the historic architecture and the historical functions of the downtown is essential – just saving the buildings isn’t enough.”18 People want to be excited, so not only do the buildings have to exist, but the activities and historic functions need to exist as well. All of these attractions pose as a distraction from the actual historic elements of the city, which should be the buildings themselves.

As a southwestern city, “Historic architectural styles in San Luis Obispo include Spanish Colonial (Mission), Italianate (renaissance Revival), Victorian, Neoclassicism,

17 Ibid, 149.
18 Ibid, 149.
Richardson Romanesque, and Art Deco/Moderne." A study conducted about the historic and historic looking architecture in the city, took groups of students and showed them buildings asking them to rate their attitude toward the buildings in "scales of importance of eight city services, (historic preservation and architectural review included). Also were scales of standards of historic preservation and new buildings that ‘add to the character of the city’. The third attitude scale used “Linkert ratings” to evaluate statements about architecture.” Results indicated that the viewers could tell the difference between historic and “fake” historic buildings, and gave higher ratings for aesthetic pleasure and overall importance to the historic buildings as opposed to “fake” historic buildings. It was also indicated that they were generally thought to be more beautiful than contemporary buildings.

The outcome of this study further supports the importance of historic architecture, but in terms of aesthetics. Although people fundamentally understand why historic architecture is important to its location, aesthetics seems to be the main concern. “In San Luis Obispo, efforts at historic preservation are supported by the residents’ desire to preserve their downtown and the downtown’s economic value for the tourist industry.” This statement is concerning because while historic preservation is being prioritized, it is not done for the purpose of preserving the history of southern California as a unique region of the United States. It is done in order to boost the economy. While preservation is important for the livelihood and economy of any city, it can simultaneously express the unique cultural characteristics of culture in the region. It all

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19 Ibid, 150.
20 Ibid, 152.
ties back to the importance of self-expression, and the difference between creating a showpiece of culture and a historically significant preservation of culture.

Historic New England—which encompasses historic structures in the New England region—in comparison, places more emphasis on the importance of historic structures themselves. Historic New England, only recently known as SPNEA, The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, founded in 1910 by William Appleton, exemplifies American preservation projects that had motives to portray a perception of national identity that promoted American values of elitism. Appleton took special interest in removing himself from SBPA, “which remained active as more of a preservation society committed to medieval life, craftsmanship, and architecture. SPBA boasted, however, that it was ‘the only society in New England which is interested in the protection of ancient buildings as ancient buildings.’”22 Appleton’s mission was to preserve the colonial aesthetic of the region as a way of promoting a type of nationalism. He comments on faults in the multinational population of America and “his belief that governments (particularly ones dominated by immigrants) could not be trusted with a subject as sensitive and vital to Brahmin’s identity as history.”23 He was deeply concerned with his organization’s ability to represent American history through American eyes and felt that “only through private associations could the right Yankees protect their past.”24 Concerns of this nature demonstrate how the main preservation society of New England was founded with extreme nationalist viewpoints that would continue to dictate the type of architecture preserved and the image of America that was evoked.

23 Ibid, 54
24 Ibid, 55.
Appleton’s desire to reflect American culture through preserving architecture soon spread throughout the region. “More effectively than those societies with limited memberships, SPNEA popularized that culture as it protected the most visible symbols of the colonial and revolutionary eras.”25 His ability to popularize this style of architecture and the basic principles of American culture its represents is a precursor to a desire that still exists today—mainly on the Eastern coast of the United States—to preserve and recreate colonial and revolutionary culture as a symbol for American identity and pride.

Not only did the structures that Appleton chose to preserve represent his version of American ideals through aesthetics, but also did so through their function. One particular example is the Seven Gables, a seventeenth century house in Salem, Massachusetts. Appleton’s intent for the house was to use it to aid in the transition of immigrants into American culture. “Seven Gables served in 1910, as did the Old Bakery after 1911, as a settlement house. Within that industrial and tenement quarter, Emmerton predicted that the Puritan house, Yankee novel, and settlement work ‘must surely help in making American citizens out of our boys and girls.’ There immigrants learned housekeeping, sewing, and even sloyd, a preindustrial carpentry of Europe that was hardly practical in the new environs.”26 Not only did the house represent colonial construction and architectural style, it also promoted the identity of the United States as being superior to the cultures of incoming immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century.

SPNEA later turned toward museums as a way to fill a void that existed when historic structures could not fully evoke the sense of historical context needed to

26 Ibid, 74.
appreciate the United States and the significant figures of its past. "Whether the case concerned a period room or a piece of furniture, preservationists thought that the sight of those forms would prompt Americans—newcomer and native alike—to accept their aesthetics, work harder, live more humbly, and appreciate Yankee traditions." 27 These museums and showpieces could potentially be seen as propaganda, pushing the importance and perceived greatness of America, and the democratic and proactive foundation it was built on. “ With the sanction of the state, the commitment of progressivism, the independence of private initiative, and the blessings of wealth and education, they [SPNEA/Appleton] had the authority to define what was important in the past and, implicitly, in the future.” 28 The power of preservation is adequately described here, in that individuals have the choice to recreate history as they want it to be, just by preserving certain pieces of architecture and therefore creating a particular ambiance and environment. These endeavors altered historic accuracy for the sake of promoting an identity for the United States that was chosen rather than the one that inherently exists.

As time went on, Appleton even tried to create the first version of what is known as a living history museum. A foreshadow of Colonial Williamsburg, Appleton’s “village” demonstrates a determination as well as an understanding that built environments create a provocative sense of time and place, and further emphasizes the importance of preservation as a means of promoting an image of history and identity of a culture or region.

Looking further at the Appleton's idea for a historic village, his plans for the site became more in depth.

27 Ibid, 155.
28 Ibid.
Rather than create a park by happenstance, he wanted ‘a series of closely connected villages, each representing a fifty-year period in New England history.’ Like Maihaugen with its church on the hill, Appleton’s village would have ‘its meeting-house situated on the village green or facing the village square and surrounded by the typical buildings of its period.’ It would show everyday patterns of the village and employ artisans in period costume who preserved their crafts. As it insulated antiquities from modern, corrupting surroundings, it would allow visitors to immerse themselves in the site’s mystical aura.29

This image from the early twentieth century is reminiscent of historic sites such as Plimouth Plantation and Colonial Williamsburg. Appleton’s desire to express the past through the built environment was becoming more involved, but less historically accurate. “Appleton’s picture of the colonial landscape was certainly more myth than fact. The comforting image of a meetinghouse on the green surrounded by dignified homes did not reflect the colonial period at all, but instead a growing urbanism and an accommodation to industrialism that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.”30 Appleton’s idea of what American history should be, based on the time period he grew up in, exemplifies another flaw in the system of historic preservation by means of historic villages. No longer is the site representing accurate historic accounts and architectural choices, but instead is representing the image of America as certain individuals wish it to appear. The “meetinghouse on the green” image, used as an image for the communal and democratic nature of America provides a somewhat euphoric example of town planning. By using this particular architectural setup, Appleton is drawing from the most positive aspects of colonial American culture. He does this in order to perpetuate an image of the American community at its finest, instead of looking

29 Ibid, 166.
to recreate a more historically accurate atmosphere that expressed the true struggles of early American life.

Similar flaws can be seen in the construction of replica eighteenth-century buildings in Colonial Williamsburg that were constructed in “order to recreate an eighteenth century image of the towns architecture for tourists…. this showed that the public wants historic-looking buildings and is less interested in preserving actual architectural history.” 31 The case of Appleton and his village shows the building blocks for the mentality that went into creating Colonial Williamsburg and other historic sites that have become a part of popular American tourist culture. “Rivaling the creativity of the moving picture, [these villages] were based on the belief that history could be remade, regardless of the known facts, as long as it had an authentic look and ambiance.” 32 Appearance and the “feeling” of authenticity are now the major factors in drawing an audience. The desire for this type of successful historic aesthetic can be seen in specific cases of preservation, particularly in Colonial Williamsburg.

Colonial Williamsburg was constructed to become a historic village. The historic setting proves little purpose other than preserving an image of American colonial history alongside what is arguably the oldest college in the country. Williamsburg historically, is known for the College of William and Mary, and was originally the capital of Virginia. “Had it remained the state capital, a century and a half of growth would undoubtedly have altered its character. As it was, a second removal of the capital, this time to Richmond in 1780, caused the town to lapse into comparative obscurity until its revival as a museum

village in the 1930’s.” The choice to create a historic village in Williamsburg allows for a certain amount of leverage in terms of historic preservation and accuracy. While the town has many historic buildings—many of which are a part of the college—the fact that it remained in obscurity for almost two centuries made the manipulation of its function and built environment that much easier.

Events and buildings are what often designate a place as historic. Considering that Williamsburg remained in obscurity for so long, one would think that the emphasis on the “historic” part of Colonial Williamsburg would revolve around its architecture. The obscurity of the city made it possible for “Williamsburg [to] retained a number of its eighteenth-century houses.” However, more prominent buildings such as the Governor’s Palace that was torn down, and was rebuilt entirely in 1931-1934. “The building we see today has the virtue of showing something of what the end of Palace Green looked like throughout most of the eighteenth century. But it also has the limitations of being constructed from modern materials and being at best an educated guess.” The inaccuracy of the reconstruction is a testament to a priority of image over history. Recreating architecture for the sake of creating a somewhat fantastical and superior depiction of the colonial United States, falsely glorifies what it meant to be an American living during the eighteenth century.

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34 Ibid, 67-68.
Another example of inaccuracy in recreating buildings in Williamsburg is the Capital building. Originally completed in 1703, a fire damaged the building in 1747 and it was rebuilt completely in 1793. In 1832, the east wing was damaged again in a fire and was then demolished. Specifications in the various Acts for its original construction, the excavated foundations, and the representation on the ‘Bodleian Plate’ formed the basis for the reconstruction, although the academic training of the restoration architects led to errors in rebuilding with the imposition of certain concepts of turn-of-the-century Beaux-

Figure 1
Capitol, Plan.
Williamsburg, VA.
Source: Donnelly and Roth, Architecture in Colonial America, 80.
Arts symmetry. Again the details of finishing the interiors had to be derived from contemporary examples.36

Not only is the reconstruction of this building historically inaccurate, but was also influenced by contemporary architectural trends and values. (Figures 1-2.) Using Beaux Arts design tactics demonstrates the prominence of neoclassical architecture in the United States at the time, and the push to preserve and recreate this style as a representation of America during its founding era. Here the ideas of democracy and noble government are manifesting as products of the desire to express the identity of America positively at a time when “the proliferation of historic houses, living history farms, and similar sites that achieve increasing visibility as cultural tourism became indispensable in locations with depressed economies.”37 Subsequently this was taking place during the great depression, when hope and a positive outlook on the United States were strongly needed in addition to a boost in the economy. Economic drive continues to trump historic

36 Ibid, 81.
accuracy and therefore suppress the ability to represent an identity derived from original structures that expresses important historic context.

The case of historic preservation in Old San Juan proves be more culturally involved than that of Historic Williamsburg. Puerto Ricans look to preservation in order to understand and create an identity, as opposed to constructing an image of preservation to reflect a self-designated identity. Because Puerto Rico is a region that has been constantly colonized “the additive resultant is the fragmented memory of an interrupted culture. The attached fragments have relied on the imagery of their represented domain….This long cultural transformation by external imposition exposes the drawback of the urban pattern which composes the image of the present cities.”38 In order to build an accurate history of the island and its culture, Puerto Ricans look to historic structures in order to unite themselves under a common heritage.

Tomas Lopez-Pumarejo argues in “Cultural Politics and Historic Preservation: The Case of Old San Juan, Puerto Rico” that architecture may still give a biased historical image. He states that “old architecture gains iconic role in the construction of new social subjects, while it preserves traditional accounts of national patrimony that vaguely represent the social fabric of the country.”39 His observation suggests that historic architecture may still not accurately portray cultural heritage. As Puerto Rico has been colonized since the 1520’s, the built environment is a reflection of imposed social views and the priorities of its colonizers (The Spaniards and North Americans). Therefore, looking past the indigenous population and culture of Puerto Rico that was phased out by the Spanish, the legacy of colonial oppression is an aspect of the Puerto Rican social

39 Ibid, 40.
environment that has developed over time. As Puerto Ricans mainly identify with the Spanish colonial legacy, perhaps the seemingly biased aspect of historic buildings proves to be more indicative of the Island’s cultural identity than the argument suggests.

Lopez-Pumarejo also comments on the Spanish prominence in San Juan. He states, “There is nothing in Puerto Rico more physically Spanish than the sixteen blocks that compromise the colonial part of its capital. As such it is a monument to Spanish heritage and a massive advertisement – like Quebec City – for cultural distinction, a vision shared by political leaders who championed Old San Juan’s 1992-3 embellishment project.”\(^{40}\) Not only does he support that Spanish identity has been created through architectural preservation and aesthetic choices in San Juan, but that the built environment is used as an “Advertisement” for the region. While the effort to preserve Old San Juan may be more culturally and historically accurate as a whole in comparison to Colonial Williamsburg, the mission behind the architectural aesthetic is to brand an image of culture to tourists. The difference is that the preservation of Old San Juan is indicative of historically significant events regarding fights over territory, and the overall development of Puerto Rico as a colony. Williamsburg is a recreation of mundane eighteenth century activities meant to express a day in the life of colonial America.

\(^{40}\) Ibid, 41.
Old San Juan is literally surrounded by historic structures. The fortifications built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries line the coast of the city. Strategically located and constructed, these forts and walls tell a story about the adversity faced during the period of colonization on the island. “The Spanish system of fortifications in San Juan, Puerto Rico is the oldest European construction in the United States and one of the oldest in the New World. These fortifications guarded the entrance to San Juan Bay, helped the Spanish maintain sovereignty over Puerto Rico, and protected Spanish commerce in the Caribbean basin.”

The original structures still exist in the original locations, open to the public to walk through and around. “The Spanish spent the next 150 years building a defense line around San Juan to defend the city and its people from enemy attacks.

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Completed in 1678, the 50-foot high wall stretched from El Morro to San Cristobal, thus bordering the city on both sides.”

This wall, called La Muralla, (figure 3) was built in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and has been attacked and structurally compromised many times since. It may appear to be a structure with the ability to withstand destruction, based on its expansive height of 40 ft. and heavy appearance. However, it has come to attention in recent years that the wall is in need of some serious preservation. La Muralla “is no match for its latest enemy: erosion, neglect and the push of development into the oldest section of San Juan.” These threats to the structural integrity of the wall became prevalent when in 2004, “a 70-foot section of La Muralla collapsed, leaving island residents and government officials in shock and politicians raising questions about the landmark structure’s future.” In response to the collapse, Luis Forturo, the non-voting commissioner to the United States Congress secured $600,000 for the repair and preservation of the structure, stating that, “the structure has ‘tremendous historical and cultural significance.’ Puerto Rico’s government also pitched in, raising about $3 million to fund repairs.” The strong efforts to fund the preservation of La Muralla demonstrate the cultural significance of these historic structures in Old San Juan. It is a testament to the connection Puerto Ricans have with a legacy of constant invasion and territorial battles.

La Muralla as well as many of the other fortifications still exist within the circulation system of the city. Sidewalks and streets run alongside the fortifications,

42 Ibid.
43 R. Quintanilla, “San Juan Struggles to Save Historic Wall Built From 1539-1641, Structure is a Symbol of Pride for Puerto Rico”. South Florida Sun, April 16.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
which provides interactive experience with visitors and creates a narrative of the history of the island and the constant defense against other European invaders. Along with the placement of these structures comes the “threat [of] the growing volume of traffic rumbling along the narrow streets of Old San Juan where cement trucks and commercial delivery vehicles are a common sight and send powerful vibrations into streets pressing against the wall.” As threats to the wall increase, action needs to be taken in terms of preservation. Not only does the wall act as a living piece of Puerto Rican colonial history, it attracts visitors. “La Muralla, with its pillbox sentry posts and two military forts, has become one of the most important economic engines in the Caribbean, drawing upward of 1.2 million visitors annually. More than 400 years old, it stands as a symbol of pride for Puerto Ricans around the world.” The connection San Juan’s historic fortification system has with the city transcends its literal structural placement. Attractions such as these not only draw in tourists, who drive a significant amount of the Island’s economy, but also spread a message about the history of colonialism and what is means to be Puerto Rican. Preserving this wall has become increasingly important in the city’s preservation efforts and demonstrates the connection that San Juan makes between historic structures, tourism, and national pride.

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
As one walks around the city, one becomes immersed in the story of the Spanish's fight for power on the island. Not only fortifications tell these stories, but so do residential homes such as Casa Blanca, which was constructed in the 1520s. "The house provided defense against attacks from the Caribbean Indians and a home for the Puerto Rican governor's family, who at the time were the descendants of the Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon."\(^4\)\(^8\) The house still exists as a museum and is open to the public. The fact that these historic structures reside in their original sites, provides an experience that creates greater understanding of the history and legacies of the development of the

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island, in terms of location. As these structures are mostly integrated into the more contemporary developments of the city, the historic plazas in relation to the houses and forts create a history through relative location.

The relative location of important structures to one another can explain social dynamics and hierarchies that existed in colonial Puerto Rico. Many of these structures also inherently speak to the war-like environment that existed during the time of European conquest in the Caribbean. El Morro, a sixteenth century fort in Old San Juan provides an example of how the Spanish used architecture to combat their enemies. “By 1596, El Morro’s strategic location and four-cannon defense system proved successful after it withstood the first British attack, which was led by English privateer Sir Francis Drake.”

El Morro’s structure has also been changed and adapted as different invading forces have threatened and attacked San Juan over the past 400 years. Research and sampling have shown the different ways in which the construction of the fort has changed in relation to the damages it has faced and the invasion of the United States during the late nineteenth century. Over time adjustments, have been made to accommodate the advances in weaponry and their placement as well as the introduction of electricity and cistern water supply systems in the early twentieth century. (Figure 4) The transformations of El Morro represent important information about the colonial legacy of Puerto Rico. Changes made to the structure directly represent the political, technological and social evolution of the city and the military efforts to combat invaders. El Morro

49 Ibid.
stands not only as a historic structure but as a built timeline of colonial power and transformation in Puerto Rico. The historic buildings of Old San Juan expose visitors to a time period more truthfully and directly than those of Colonial Williamsburg.

The house museums and forts have minimal labels and unimposing employees that run the sites. Knowledge is gained more from experiencing these spaces as they are, allowing for one's imagination to fathom the events that took place, and lifestyles lived, solely based on spaces created hundreds of years ago. Colonial Williamsburg relies on actors, and interpreters pushing false excitement, while emulating colonial household chores and activities. Many of the actual historic buildings do not even exist on the main street where the historic “attractions” are located. Both Colonial Williamsburg and Old San Juan strive to present the heritage and identity of their respective regions through their built environments, but approach this endeavor in different ways. The choices made by each historic city in terms of self-representation reflect the nature of national identity, and how it can either be found or fathomed.

One further example of a preservation project that has importance to the local population as well as historic significance is the Iglesia de San Jose. The Church was “built on land donated by Don Juan Ponce de Leon, under the supervision of Dominican friars in 1532, making it the second-oldest church in the Western Hemisphere and certainly one of the oldest structures in the city.” In an article by Jessica Coscia about her personal connection to the church, she expresses the significance of the building to her and her mother. Not only is this building special to her, but to the rest of the architectural

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environment in Old San Juan. Coscia harks back saying, “I remember Spanish colonial buildings sitting next to huge modern condos, which existed alongside tiny bodegas and panaderias, decorated with African-inspired artwork.”52 As a native to the island, it is clear that the historic buildings of the city evoke more than just an aesthetic to those who reside there. The influence of the built environment transcends evocation of just the historic timeline of the city

Coscia is happy with the attention the church is receiving in terms of its preservation. “The church has gone through extensive renovations over the past several years, and construction has been slow progressing. Patronato de Monumentos de San Juan, a nonprofit organization in charge of the restoration effort, is committed to doing authentic restoration, including the use of original materials and techniques, which will take longer but will ensure the long-term preservation of the structure.”53 Referred to by Coscia as a “religious attraction of [her] youth” The importance of these cultural architectural icons of the city is further emphasized.54 She ends the article by stating, “Such places gave me perspective and taught me to embrace my ancestry and my heritage. Yet some of the places I remember from my childhood in Puerto Rico are not even around anymore. Others are in disrepair or have been traded in for modern structures and paved roads.”55 This sentiment, surely shared by other native Puerto Ricans, shows Coscia’s personal relationship with the historic structures of Old San Juan.

These buildings not only evoke the identity of the island, but give a sense of identity to Puerto Rican individuals who live elsewhere. The emotional and personal

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
response seen here, does not seem to exist as prevalently in American Colonial preservation. Iglesia de San Jose exemplifies the importance of accurate preservation as linked to its significance in the community. The historic buildings of Colonial Williamsburg seem to lack the same type of significance, and are used more as showpieces of the idealized American colonial lifestyle. Once again it can be seen that there is discourse between the way in which each city approaches historic architecture.

A final example of preservation in Old San Juan is the Cuartel de Ballaja. Built from 1854-1864, by the Spanish these barracks have become a cultural center in the city. “Used until 1898 as infantry barracks and permanent housing for approximately a thousand soldiers, it consisted of rooms for officers, soldiers and their families, storage, kitchens, dining rooms, jail cells and stables for horses. The ascending vaulted gothic ceilings above the main staircase are unique in Puerto Rico.”56 In 1976, the building was acquired by the Puerto Rican government from the United States. This transition of ownership is significant because of Puerto Rico’s current territorial status. El Cuartel de Ballaja has been restored by the government and now houses the Paulette Beauchamp/Danz Activa Dance Center, the Fundacion Dr. San Francisco Lopes Cruz Music Center, El Museo de las Americas, the Puerto Rican Academy of the Spanish Language and the State Office of Historic Conservation. By converting the Ballaja into a cultural hub of the city, Puerto Ricans are finding ways to reclaim and express their identity as an entity of its own, in opposition of their territorial status with the United States. The Ballaja is one example of many original colonial structures that have been converted into museums, schools or cultural centers in the city, such as the Puerto Rico

Tourism Office (located in the historic building “La Princesa”), the Museum of Our African Roots, the Museum of San Juan, the School of Plastic Arts of Puerto Rico, Museum of Art of Puerto Rico, as well as numerous historic houses.

The Ballaja in particular is unique in that it does not represent a temple front, or classical Spanish/European design elements. The bulky volume and central courtyard inherently stand alone compared to the other historic buildings, because of the building’s original use as military housing. The effort to preserve such buildings and reincorporate their functionality to meet the interests of the population demonstrates the desire to build knowledge of the history and identity of the island. With “more than 400 carefully restored buildings”\(^{57}\) in Old San Juan that are distinctly unmodified, the city presents a historic picture that clearly represents the colonial nature of Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rican culture has developed out of constant colonial status and the struggle to express a distinct identity that obviously exists but has been hard to represent. The contemporary uses of preservation projects in the city not only educate and attract visitors, but simultaneously create a sense of national pride that can educate Puerto Ricans about their history. These motives express the part of Puerto Rican identity that desires to strengthen the understanding of their culture and to tell a story.

\(^{57}\) "Beautiful Old San Juan," http://www.touroldsanjuan.com/.
Part Three: Representation and Attraction

The visitor experiences had in both Old San Juan and Colonial Williamsburg differ greatly. Difference in experience comes from a difference in self-promotion and advertising. The Old San Juan website is modest, and its section on historic buildings and sites is concise and descriptive of the function of each building. When describing El Catedral de San Juan the caption states that it was “Originally built in 1521, it was destroyed by a hurricane in 1526 and rebuilt in 1540. In 1615 it was damaged by a second hurricane. The church’s present state is the result of major restorations performed in 1917. The church houses the marble tomb of Ponce De León and the relic of San Pio. Legend has it that the relic is the waxed remains of this saint.”58 The descriptions focus on the significance of the construction of the building and the features that are significant in relation to important historic and religious figures in Puerto Rican culture.

In contrast, Colonial Williamsburg presents itself as an amusement park. The website is geared toward advertising the “fun” qualities and activities of the city, half of which take place in “fake” eighteenth century architecture. Under the “historic buildings” section of the website the first few buildings shown have a date of construction, while others do not have a date or the historical context of the structure. This description of the Court House says a lot about the image the website is trying to evoke:

Built in 1771, the Courthouse was the county court. The officials who served were the principal agents of local government and had broad executive and judicial authority. The court’s jurisdiction included crimes ranging from petty theft to absence from church. Sentences were often immediate and public—carried out at the stocks and pillory out front.59

58 Ibid.
This image of American culture is accompanied by the many pictures on the website of children and families laughing or staring in awe. The scenario described above as the “history of the building” is also presented on site with a show featuring crime and punishment in colonial America. Why should this system be treated as a form of entertainment? While intended to educate, this form of historic representation almost makes a mockery out of a legal system that has grown and developed to become a complex and quite controversial judicial circuit in the contemporary world. The Courthouse is just one example of the way in which Williamsburg promotes itself as a theme park of sorts. In turn the image of America presented to tourists—both domestic and international—remains relatively positive.

![Figure 5](https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.com/plan/tickets/)

**Figure 5**
Scene from Revolutionary War Reinactment.
Colonial Williamsburg, VA.
[https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.com/plan/tickets/](https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.com/plan/tickets/)

The introductory statement on the website also steers away from the historic significance of the city:

Discover Colonial Williamsburg and become a citizen of the Revolutionary City. Engage with the local community and experience firsthand the daily struggles of wartime. Explore our art museums, unleash your kids’ inner colonists, tee off a game of golf, or relax and unwind at the Spa. Stay at one of the official Colonial Williamsburg hotels, with a variety of opportunities
History, excitement, and luxury are the three adjectives that might come to mind when reading this description. Conveniently located all within the same three blocks, Colonial Williamsburg is promoting “daily struggles” in a seemingly lighthearted and engaging way. By preserving the image of American Colonial history in this light, it is supporting the identity of the United States as a nation which views itself in positive form, and attempts to boost its legacy as a nation with an image of greatness. Ultimately, the buildings are overshadowed by the activities being promoted (Figures 5 and 6). For example, where the Governor’s palace is used as a backdrop for the activity in the foreground (Figure 6). Instead of allowing people to draw from the historic structures, the historic role-play has taken precedent. Every image evokes either a sense of grandeur, or excitement and positive action. This is a representation that does not reflect the true struggle and development of American colonial society.

By recreating colonial style houses, Colonial Williamsburg is evoking the type of historic image Americans desire. Conveniently left out are the horrors of slavery,
struggles to survive diseases and inclement weather, or forms of social injustice within the court system. While some of these struggles are portrayed in Colonial Williamsburg, the severity has been lifted. In a way this is metaphoric for American national identity in general. The history of this country has been built upon finding freedom, but also an image of superiority and power. Colonial Williamsburg is an example of the ways in which Americans can forget to look inward and assess the faults of the nation as well as the successes. In order to do this, representations of history in architecture as well as writing, conversation and other forms of expression have been skewed to positively display the social foundation America was built on. Therefore, the physical forms that a nation chooses to preserve and promote are direct products of the identity acquired by that nation.

Old San Juan and Colonial Williamsburg are only two examples of built environments that express national identity through choices in historic preservation. The biggest contrast seems to come out of desires of continuous versus definitive expressions of history and legacy. San Juan provides a structurally and geographically accurate representation of the historic structures of the city. These historic buildings have also been adapted to not only display the history of the island as a Spanish and then, American colony, but, combines this with the creation of organizations and institutions that promote further discovery of the identity and culture of the Island as a “nation” of its own.

By making the historic structures functional and using them to house cultural and educational institutions, San Juan is perpetuating the idea that these buildings are a part of the identity of the culture. In a way it is a metaphor for the way in which the past is
representative of the development of contemporary culture and sociopolitical dynamics. Using preservation projects to help create a narrative of Puerto Rico’s legacy makes a statement about the way in which Puerto Ricans feel heavily connected to their past and their Spanish heritage as their source of identity.

In contradiction, Williamsburg, as a representation of American colonial history is a geographically condensed version of a colonial city that promotes a definitive image of what American culture evolved from. Seeking to evoke a sense of pride through the lifestyle of the first settlers, Colonial Williamsburg represents a definitive expression of history. The city does not link the historic buildings to the activities, and political and social systems that not only took place in them, but evolved out of them as well. The evolution of American culture and identity is what is missing from many representations of preservation projects. Not to mention that a country that is presenting itself as the forefather of freedom and rebellion from the oppressive colonial rule of the British, uses European styles of architecture to represent its history.

America is founded on successful democratic ideals, and there is a missing piece that exists between the foundation of the nation and contemporary issues. Colonial Williamsburg presents the positive aspects of creating a country from scratch, but does not highlight the reality of challenges faced during the time period it represents.

Is the nation that was founded in 1776, still the nation that exists today? While the story of America’s foundation is an important one, it is not the only story anymore. As a nation of nations America has to make conscious decisions about how its history is portrayed, and attempt to connect this history to contemporary society. Colonial Williamsburg allows visitors to hark back to the glory of the American Revolution, but
advertises the activities and aesthetics as a concrete image for American history and identity. As America has grown and developed over the past 240 years, more histories have developed as well, and presenting colonial America as the poster image of American identity dismisses the ways in which this has happened.

Williamsburg and San Juan both originated in a colonial context. However, the United States has chosen to preserve an image of America’s newfound independence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Colonial Williamsburg is a testament to the emphasis placed in imagery and aesthetics in terms of preserving and displaying American history and identity. The city’s relative obscurity until the 1930s and reintroduction as an icon for American colonial life, reinforces the idea that the image of American history takes president over the location itself. By contrast San Juan presents its Colonial heritage as an ongoing narrative. Puerto Ricans choose to identify with their Spanish roots despite the colonial power of Spain beginning in the sixteenth century. The island of Puerto Rico has been fought over for decades and the preservation of its built environment has been established to tell the story of its progression, and to continue to separate the identity of Puerto Rico from its territorial status with the United States.

Both cities use historic architecture to present an image of identity. While these images are very different it should be taken into consideration that historic preservation should highlight a historically accurate narrative that involves both the positive and negative aspects of a nation. It should tell a story, not write one. To interpret the legacy of a nation, its foundation—both figurative and literal—needs to be examined and preserved in accurate form. When experiencing historic sites it is important to draw from not only the physical representation of history, but the implied cultural significance that
can be discerned through the means by which it was preserved and the intentions behind
the preservation as well.


