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Essay #2  
Cultural Influences  
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### Restoration vs. Conservation

In this essay I will compare and contrast two "historical" sites, which I have been to personally. While discussing the purpose and personal affect they each have I will relate these concepts back to the terms of authenticity and historical value. Using *Authenticity and historic preservation; towards an authentic history* by Randolph Starn as a jumping point into these terms as concepts.

The two sites I will compare in this essay are Machu Picchu in Peru and the Atocha train station memorial in Spain. The purpose(s) of each site are similar in that they are a link to a moment in the past. A moment that is considered important enough to still matter to the people living today. This is where the similarities end, however, due to the vast "age" difference of each site and the main reasoning behind why their historical moments matter.

Machu Picchu is said to represent "the most significant tangible legacy of the Inca civilization." The setting of this site is naturally breath taking against the Victorian mountain range but it is also covered in Incan technology and knowledge. Most of which can still not be explained fully to this day. The Atocha site, on the other hand, is much younger in comparison to Machu Picchu and its purpose is much more somber one than the awe and fascination of that instantaneously hits you with Machu Picchu. The Atocha sites purpose is to commemorate the lives lost in the March 2004 terrorist bombings in Madrid, Spain. This site is a 36 ft. glass cylinder that goes through the train station (underground) through the ceiling to the outside. It is marked with text of the words of grief that were shared over the following days after the attack.

The preservation regime of each monument is drastically different due to the difference in size. Machu Picchu has recently limited the number of visitors that it will permit each year and the park itself is made up of roped off sections and common foot paths. In turn the Atocha site is maintained through a

daily cleaning of the inside room, attached to the station. And I assume a bi-annual cleaning of the outside of the monument, since it is made of glass.

These regimes are specific to each site and it is interesting to note that the Machu Picchu regime only recently became stricter in the way of preservation. This links back to the idea of preserving the "historical value" of the site. Which is directly tied to the importance of the historical moment that makes the site particularly important to us now. Per Starn, the concept of historical value is both "time-specific and documentary." Meaning that there is a direct correlation to the amount of time that the site has existed and the amount of documentation that it comes with. Interestingly, an argument can be made that while Machu Picchu has defiantly existed for a longer time than the Atocha site, the amount of documentation is probably greater for the Atocha site while there is less for Machu Picchu. Does this then make them equals where "historical value" is concerned? With further analysis, an argument could be made for this point, but for the purposes of this essay let's remain under the belief that there is no way to equalize the overall value of each site because their purposes are more different than they are similar.

These regimes are also easy to identify because they are made public information as a way of showing concern for the preservation of each site. While preservation should be considered it is also important to note that there are two different types of preservation at work here. In one hand Machu Picchu is mostly concerned with the preservation of the Incan landmark and that supposed way of life. How genuine this preservation is coming into question when we think of the number of things that cannot be explained about the site. The seemingly simplest question, how it was constructed, has yet to be answered. This is such a fundamental question and is starkly apparent when viewing the site in its current state. It is easily distinguishable where the original architecture ends and the "new" construction begins.

On the other hand, the Atocha site, is only twelve years old and marks a time that is considered important for other reasons than preservation of culture. It is the preservation of the sympathy for the lives which were lost on that tragic day. Its meaning is not necessarily more emotional than that of Machu Picchu but it has a more forced tone about it because of the current state of the world. How easily we forget that the Incans were enslaved by the Spanish and that there's some responsibility in the fact that there are so many unanswered questions about that site. It is true that both sites are equal in the "authenticity" or their meaning. As Starn said, "It is also no exaggeration to say that the concept of authenticity is fuzzy and an easy target for criticism." Due to our obsession with the real and genuine we have defined and redefined these terms to the point of individualism. There is not a certain perspective which is widely excepted nor are there any that are widely refuted. There is only what the individual chooses to believe in that specific moment they are presented with a thing and told that it is "authentic".

Personally, it comes down to two things for me to except the term authentic: what was the original purpose/composition of the place, object, thing etc and, secondly, how has it changed since its creation? These are what I consider to be good rules of thumb for measuring the authenticity of something. However, as Starn talks about there are so many different "measuring sticks" that the term has become muddled and unformed.

The affective impressions I had at each of these sites were also very different but at the same time somehow similar. Both left affected me in such a way that I became somberly reminiscent. In each situation, the site itself impressed upon me the fragility of the world that I take for grant it so often. Each, in turn, made me feel a sense of wonder. Machu Picchu at first was just a sense of wonder in a way that was closer to amazement. I was amazed by the location, surroundings, and sheer massiveness of it all. But after the initial shock wore off, I became amazed and confounded by the people who

currently existed there are how completely opposite they were to the people who were responsible for creating this place.

While at the Atocha site the initial impact is grief, due to the nature of the design and the outward appearance of the text. I was in a room, underground staring up at this sheer glass wall full of words from people who may or may not have known the victims of the bombing. I remember feeling small. The text filled my head. It was in all different languages, some I understood some I didn't. But it didn't matter because the expression, the overall tone was clear. This is where the two relate because there are moments in both sites where a recall feeling small. Not in the sense that my body was physically shrinking under the weight that each site invisibly carries, but that my perspective had shifted in terms of the way I saw the world. My perspective grew, to try and conceive what the purpose of these sites were and how their existence meant something more. More than what I had already known.

Being American and living in such a way that every moment is go-go-go it's so easy to forget what a great big world we live in. My point is not to stop and smell the flowers, as it were. My point is that there are millions of people who exist on this earth with us. And our perspectives become so focused and concerned with our own little bubbles that it is easily forgotten that we, as a species, have been around for millions of years. I think therefore it is too easy for terms like "authenticity" or "historical value" to become muddled. Because there are so many of us trying to solve the never-ending puzzle of purpose. It seems absurd really. The idea that this thing is old, hence it must contain value because it meant something to someone who no longer is in existence. At the same time, however, without the creation of meaning, would we have been able to survive this long?

### Works Cited

Starn, R. "Authenticity and Historic Preservation: Towards an Authentic History." *History of the Human Sciences* 15.1 (2002): 1-16. Web.