International Journal of Heritage Studies

ISSN: 1352-7258 (Print) 1470-3610 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjhs20

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To cite this article: John Stephens (2014) ‘Fifty-two doors’: identifying cultural significance through narrative and nostalgia in Lakhnu village, International Journal of Heritage Studies, 20:4, 415-431, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2012.758651

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.758651

Published online: 16 Jan 2013.

International Journal of Heritage Studies, 2014
Vol. 20, No. 4, 415–431, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.758651

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'Fifty-two doors': identifying cultural significance through narrative and nostalgia in Lakhnu village

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(*Received 9 October 2012; final version received 11 December 2012*)

This paper proposes an alternative way of evaluating heritage values in the assessment of an abandoned school building in Lakhnu, a small rural Indian village in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Its aim is to re-think the appropriateness of professionally assessed methodologies, such as the Australian ICOMOS Burra Charter, and find others which are more inclusive and sensitive of community views and aspirations. Villagers claim this building as a key part to their cultural heritage, and view its desertion and disintegration with frustration. As part of a larger scheme to improve village infrastructure and to enable its empowerment, the aim is to assess the significance of this place to the villagers, facilitate its conservation and investigate possible outcomes for its use through community participation. In this context, the concept of narrative is offered as means to establish the community meaning of a place. Narratives are powerful ways in which people understand their environment and structure a view of the world. Using stories told by villagers about their relationship with the building, this paper argues that narrative can offer an alternative method of understanding heritage significance.

Keywords: narrative; nostalgia; heritage significance; Lakhnu

Introduction

This paper emerges from a search for an appropriate way to determine the heritage significance and meaning of a derelict building in Lakhnu, a small Indian rural village in Uttar Pradesh.

Lakhnu village is located 9 km south-east of the town of Hathras, 40 km west of Mathura, important as the birthplace of the Hindu deity Krishna (see Figure 1). Surrounded by fields of chillies, the place has little public infrastructure beyond dirt roads, open drains and electricity supply to some houses. There is no sewerage, no public toilets and very few private ones. Waste of all types is conveyed in open earthen drains and garbage collection is rudimentary – the street being the primary repository for rubbish of all kinds. Villagers must visit Hathras for medical attention and the only public transport is a bus service, which runs a few times a day. The poverty level (under $1.00 US per day) applies to 40% of the population. However, there is a palpable sense of community; although the villagers are intensely aware of their plight, they have few resources to improve their situation beyond the superficial.

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Figure 1. Map of Uttar Pradesh showing location of Lakhnu (source author).

In November 2011, students and academics from Curtin University in Western Australia travelled to Lakhnu as the first stage of a project to find ways to help the villagers with the development of village housing and to work with villagers to empower them in the broader issues of education, employment and infrastructure. Part of this project involves assistance in the conservation of a derelict building. Built in the late nineteenth century and long used as a school and abandoned in the 1990s, this rendered brick building with a finely carved stone façade is slowly disintegrating. Nicknamed 'fifty-two doors' – apparently following a custom of naming buildings after the number of doors they contain – the villagers claim it as a key part of their cultural heritage and view its disintegration with frustration.

A long-term object of the Lakhnu Village Community Development Project is to assess the heritage significance of the abandoned school building, facilitate its conservation and investigate possible outcomes for its use. However, it was clear from the start of the project that official methodologies might not be appropriate, and that a method that was more inclusive and sensitive of community views and aspirations was needed.

This paper suggests that alternative ways of thinking about heritage may be more appropriate when dealing with some communities. In Australia, the ICOMOS Burra Charter offers a method of practice for the assessment, conservation and management

of heritage places. It essentially follows the philosophy of the ICOMOS Venice Charter but has been adapted and developed for Australian conditions. While its use is widespread and officially sanctioned by state and federal governments, it does have detractors and, in the view of this paper, would be an inappropriate method to negotiate the complex and sensitive nature of heritage and identity in a poor rural community. Perceived problems with the current implementation of the Charter and its effect on heritage assessment are discussed later in this paper.

As an alternative to the Burra Charter, this paper proposes the concept of 'narrative' as an approach to garner significance and meaning in heritage places, using the old school building at Lakhnu as a pilot study. Narratives are powerful ways in which people understand and know their environment and a fundamental 'means by which human beings structure and represent the world' (Mitchell 1981, iiiv). As a cultural tool, narratives have potential to convey meaning, albeit mediated by the contexts in which they arise. In many ways, the abandonment and ruin of the school building symbolises the powerlessness and dispossession of the villagers and its possible futures are of keen interest to them. The narratives that surround the place are complex, contested and are inscribed by the cultural practices that haunt its past and present uses.

However, given the limited resources of the project, how best can an assessment of the Lakhnu school be made? How can a case be made for a narrative that places the citizens of the village at its centre, and the school as a physical manifestation of that narrative? As the place deteriorates and remains largely unused, few new narratives are possible except, perhaps, ones associated with its decline. The present condition of the building generates a traumatic image that is at once nostalgic and uncanny. Revitalising the building will rejuvenate the narratives that surround it and provide a meaningful vehicle for empowerment, and the future of the village.

To answer the questions posed above, this paper examines the place of the school building within the scope of the overall project. Following is a discussion of the concept of narrative and how it has been applied in the context of the village and the school building. The paper then explores the questions of what meanings are specific to 'this' community and how a community constructs 'their' meaning rather than relying on an assessment by a heritage professional elite through established values and as determined by methods of practice, such as the Australian Burra Charter. The paper concludes that narrative is not an element that is 'added' to a place but is 'implicit', integral and a powerful alternative way of determining heritage significance.

From the outset, it should be declared that the resources of this project are limited in both time and funding, and that it is very much a work in progress. Our visits to the village were conducted over five days with 35 students from Australia and India available for the surveys. There are specific problems in conducting surveys in a poor rural village where literacy rates are uneven and – while families were generally welcoming – there is a limit to the numbers of people willing to participate and the types of question that can be asked. We were invited to survey dwellings and interview people through the agency of the children at the school, which appeared to be the only practical way to conduct such an invasive programme.

It should also be made clear that this paper is not about Indian heritage as such – nor does it engage in argument about Indian methods of conservation or assessing cultural significance. It is about using a building in India as a vehicle to explore how significance may be determined through the concept of narrative.

The project

The Lakhnu Rural Community Development Project is conducted in association with the Indian non-government organisation India Rural Education and Development Inc. (IREAD), which is primarily based in Western Australia. It has initiated education programmes and provides support to the local government-run primary school and proposes to extend its philanthropic work into improving infrastructure and living conditions in the village.

Lakhnu consists of about 500 dwellings, which house approximately 4000 people – of which 1000 are children (see Figure 2). The main industry is farming and mostly chilli is grown. The average literacy level is around 55% but lower for women at 43%. However, 'literacy' may only mean that a person is able to sign his/her name. The predominant religion is Hindu although there are also Muslims. The Indian caste system is very much evident with the lowest caste – the Scheduled Castes or Dalit – living in an isolated part of the village.

The main concern of the project was the living conditions endured by the villagers and finding practical ways of dealing with them. Among a range of matters impacting on health, indoor air pollution is of concern. Here, burning biomass fuel in badly designed fireplaces produces smoke and gases that cause serious health problems. Electricity is also an issue, as wiring and electrical connections are typically unauthorised and electrocutions – mostly of women – are common. As most dwellings do not possess a toilet and there are no public ones, the fields on the outskirts of the village serve for that purpose. There is also the issue of women's safety. To avoid the real threat of being attacked and raped when they relieve themselves outside of the home, women generally go in large groups in the early morning. To ascertain the extent of the above problems, the project conducted a comprehensive dwelling survey to ascertain the design of dwellings, their lifestyles and household practices. The

Figure 2. Lakhnu main street (source author).

streets were also surveyed because no maps of the village existed. Curtin researchers could only survey villagers by invitation though the local school. This proved reasonably successful with 53 households willing to be interviewed using an interpreter, and their dwellings surveyed and documented in preparation for drawing plans and an analysis of ventilation, light, privacy, waste disposal, capacity and skills. This stage of the project is seen as a 'reconnaissance' of living conditions and standards and also as a basis in developing relationships between the researchers and the villagers. The envisioned conservation of the derelict school building is located within this overall plan of assisting the village, and is conceived as part of the strategy to improve education and vocational training – particularly of the women.

The school is located approximately 200 m from the village on its own large rectangular plot of land and includes the old school building and three new brick classrooms and toilets (see Figure 3). The school has about 74 students ranging from 6 to 14 years of age. Education at the school is nominally free, but many children do not attend.

Twenty-five villagers were asked questions that focused on their relationship with the place. They were encouraged to tell stories about their association with the old school building: how often they visited; how they used it; how they felt about it; what future they would like for the place; and any 'stories' they knew about it. Questions were simple, conversational and open-ended. While some answers were short, they collectively comprised a narrative of that person's engagement with the place. Hindi-speaking students from Curtin University and the Malaviya National Institute of Technology at Jaipur translated questions and responses. No resident spoke English and many had never seen westerners – except on television. It is possible that meaning might have been lost in translations that depended on Indian and Australian students who were socially and culturally quite different to villagers.

Figure 3. Front of old school building (source author).

Other problems may be seen in the gap between the villagers and the researcher who interprets their stories. There is no easy answer to these potential problems except that the questions were as direct and open as possible, and that the interviewers were diligent in transcribing villagers' stories. It should be recognised that interpretation of villagers' stories, and the way that they are presented in this paper, remains an 'interpretation'.

Survey monkey was used to organise the material, and initial results indicated that 95% of those surveyed had a positive attitude and relationship with the place and 75% related stories they associated with the building (Curtin University 2011a). To augment this information, 20 school children were surveyed about the building in class (Curtin University 2011b). Children drew maps of their daily activities which included how the school building fitted into this routine and what stories they knew of the place. Most children knew it as a 'beautiful place' and used it as a fantasy playground.

Three elderly men with associations to the building's past life came forward and were willing to share what they knew of the place and show us how it had been used. Narratives were supplemented with a survey of the building fabric, and this corroborated many of the stories and added a physical context to the analysis.

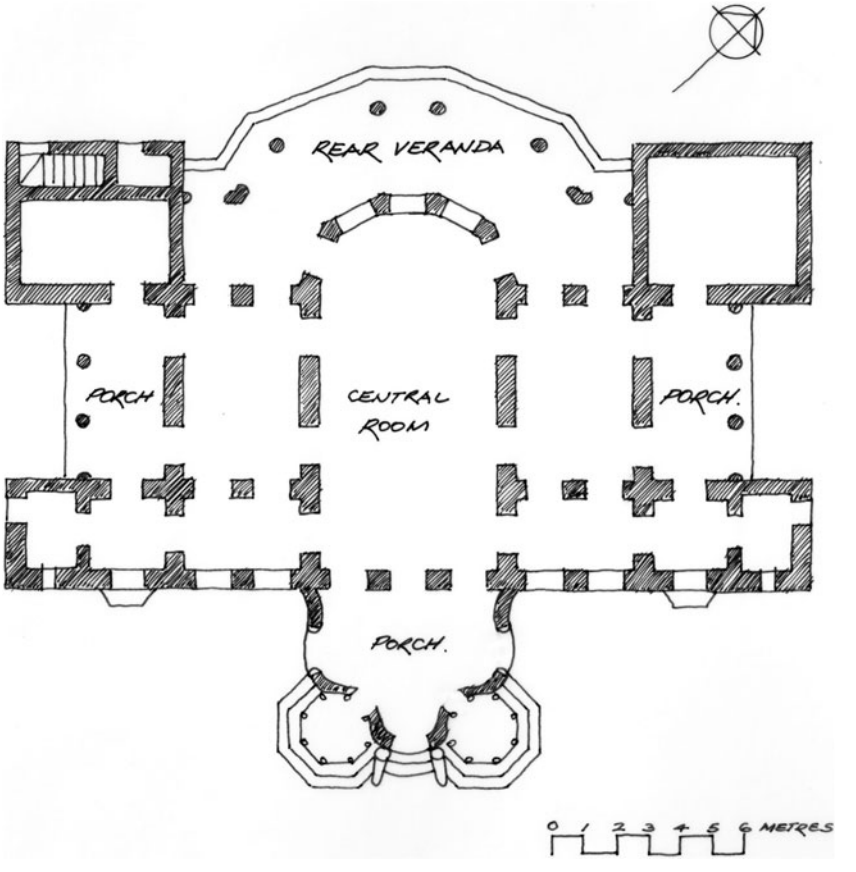

Figure 4. Plan of old school building (source author).

Workshops were held with villagers on the final day of the visit, discussing with them the project findings and validating and refining these through workshops with separate groups of men and women – a culturally necessary separation. These workshops also validated and refined the stories of the old school building, attitudes to it and its possible futures (Curtin University 2011c).

It is recognised that the term 'community', as used in heritage and in this paper to describe the Lakhnu villagers, is contested. It is a complex word usually defined in terms of a homogeneity and cohesiveness that cannot exist. In heritage, its use to 'make sense of others' reinforces a professional stewardship over the heritage process (Waterton and Smith 2010, 5). It has also been argued that community-based projects, 'tend to involve things that are done *for* communities rather than *with* them' (Waterton and Smith 2010, 7). The Lakhnu 'community' is not homogeneous and is composed of various castes, religions, income and education level. This paper consciously entertains no romantic notion of community although there were observable networks of attachments and identity between the villagers who participated. This project – at least initially – is not community-driven although it aims, eventually, to forge enough trust in the community to work alongside them as much as possible. It is recognised that this narrative analysis is not free of the professional gaze. However, it is hoped that by focusing on narrative, a more direct understanding of the meaning of the place to the community might be achieved than with current Australian practice.

Narratives

Smith (2006, 87) asserts that privileging the physical fabric and the aesthetic and technical aspects of heritage by the current 'authorised heritage discourse', 'masks the real cultural and political work that the heritage process does'. She argues that heritage should be perceived as, 'a cultural process about meaning making', and as a way that various social and cultural groups use 'to create and define identity and social and cultural meaning in and about the present'. Cultural meaning is embedded in experience of both the past and the present.

Waterton, Smith, and Campbell (2006, 349) outline a number of problems with current heritage practice in Australia and, in a discursive analysis of the Burra Charter, argue that reliance on expert knowledge in the form of heritage professionals ensures an elitist control of the heritage assessment process. This confirms, generally, that community meaning is mediated through professional interpretation and that significance is immutable through a token evaluation of community participation. While there have been attempts to incorporate more community inclusion in the heritage assessment process, 'it remains largely unsuccessful' (Waterton, Smith, and Campbell 2006, 342).

This project concentrates on the voices in the narratives that surround the Lakhnu school building to determine its community meaning. It does not use the frame of categories such as aesthetic, historic, scientific or spiritual as advocated by the Burra Charter – or other expert assessment of heritage by professionals.

Humans are prolific storytellers and we are psychologically compelled to create narratives, which are necessary for our physical and mental well-being (Hunt 2010, 115). Stories and language are ways in which people make meaningful sense of their experiences and how they fashion identities – there are secure relationships between narratives, self and identity (Hunt 2010, 115). As systems of personal

knowledge, narratives are not necessarily constant, and in an attempt to develop a coherent past (linked to identity), there is often confabulation and selective remembering and forgetting. Mitchell (1981, viii) argues that it is not a question of telling true narratives from false but importance is in the 'very value of narrativity as a mode of making sense of reality (whether the factual reality of actual events, or the moral, symbolic reality of fictions)'. Of course, historical reality in heritage does matter. However, what is at stake here is not historical veracity, but that narrative is a means to construct meaning or significance.

White (1981, 1) suggests that narratives are more easily transported transnationally than other aspects of culture. We may have problems understanding the thought patterns and motivations of different cultures but have 'less difficulty in understanding a story coming from another culture'. Echoing Roland Barthes, White argues that narrative can be translated across cultures without fundamental damage and there are transcultural aspects of narrative containing 'messages about the nature of a shared reality' (White 1981, 2). Stewart (2007, 13) observes that through narrative and language, 'we articulate the world *behind* and *beyond* the immediate context at hand'. In narrative, past, present and future time is conflated.

Narratives differ from community to community in complex and dynamic ways. There is no set pattern for particular relationships between people and cultural tools like narrative (Wertsch and Billingsley 2011, 34). However, there are patterns and processes that appear to be common to most storytelling. Narratives need to be cohesive, contextualised and temporal, and have agency (Hunt 2010, 115). The format of the narrative is also important be it oral, written or visual. Narratives can also be spatial. Both landscape and architecture have the capacity to convey narratives, and when combined with stories about place, they provide powerful ways of storytelling (Potteiger and Purinton 1998, 7 and 10; Hollis 2011, 62).

Narratives are mediated by their social and physical environment in which they emerge and, in turn, people make sense of their environment by drawing on collective memory or narrative as cultural tools. In this context, narrative frameworks 'mediate our understanding of the past and their effects on our present identities' (Wertsch and Billingsley 2011, 29). The idea of narrative as a 'mediated action' can provide a fruitful vehicle for the analysis of stories that villagers tell about the old school. Wertsch and Billingsley (2011, 31) use this concept to argue that 'remembering occurs with the help of various cultural tools' and that narrative is by far the most influential of these mnemonic tools. They suggest that there are underlying codes or 'narrative templates' which frame the narrative and are particular to any 'mnemonic community'. While they use this concept to frame national identity narratives, it also points to the possibility that there are underlying social and environment frameworks that mediate the stories told by a particular community. These codes or 'abstract frameworks' provide an agency for narratives and give it meaning. Typically, there would be many such 'agencies' involved in the narratives surrounding the old school building. However, there are some that are strongly suggested in the narratives that this project gathered. For example, 'governmental corruption', 'nostalgia' and 'loss' are a few of the frames that emerge in the interviews that may mediate these narratives. While these are probably generic to many Indian communities, they mediate 'this' village's narratives in a particular way. In this context, the various narratives about the building, as told by villagers and others, are presented below, and then analysed in terms of frames, which emerge from those narratives.

School narratives

The old Lakhnu school is a symmetrical building in a local version of the Indo-Sarencenic Revival style favoured by British architects in India in the late nineteenth century (see Figures 3, 5 and 6). Organised around a large central space, it has several rooms on each side (see Figures 4 and 7). Side porches service these side rooms. An ornate colonnaded bow-shaped verandah shades the rear. The front porch is intricately carved from red sandstone and has finely carved 'chattri' or pavilions either side. Windows on the front elevation of the building are protected with 'jharokha' or projecting balconies enhancing the rich appearance of the building. The roof is concrete over arched brickwork between steel beams. A staircase at the rear of the building was used to fill a cistern, on the roof. At the rear of the building are the remnants of a mango tree orchard and a small ornate pool. The building is in disrepair with disintegrating render and the rear verandah partially collapsed (see Figure 6). All the joinery has been removed and the roof is overgrown with grasses that choke drainage (see Figure 8). Most of the original stone floor has been removed and the place has been mined for bricks and stone. However, the names of rooms and other signage from its time as a school are still very clear (see Figure 5).

Three key members of the local community were interviewed on site, which was useful in establishing the history and operations of the place throughout its life. Mr S, a former magistrate, Mr B, a former student at the school and Mr K, also a former student at the school were interviewed.[1]

Mr S's story was that the building begun life around 1900 as a magistrates' court. He was one of the magistrates who used the building. It was built by Raja Man Singh, the local landowner. To the villagers and children surveyed, he is known by a number of folk names including 'the king' and Raja Sahib. Mr S

Figure 5. Old school building detail (source author).

Figure 6. Rear of old school building (source author).

Figure 7. Interior of the central room of old school building (source author).

described him as a very fierce man with absolute power. The large central room in the building operated as a court of law and the rooms on either side had utility functions or acted as bedrooms for guests. The two chattris either side of the porch

Figure 8. Roof of old school building (source author).

were occupied by sentries guarding the main entrance to the building (Mr S 2011). Mr S's story is contradicted somewhat by a more recent interview with the grandson of Raja Man Singh (Mr A) who constructed the building. He insists that the building was built as a guesthouse, which acted as a court when the magistrate came to stay on his circuit (Mr A 2012).[2]

When the court was in session, the magistrate (Mr S) sat at the south eastern end near the entry porch and those approaching the court were escorted to the rear of the building and entered the court room via the rear verandah. The court handled petty crimes and other civil matters. Mr S said that he was first employed by the landowner who owned the building, and later by the British. Nobody was allowed to approach within 15 m of the building unless they were on official court business or had other dealings with the court. The magistrate had sweeping powers and could prevent the entry of police if he thought fit. At this time, the building was approached via a driveway that looped around a tree in front of the building and the imprint of this drive and the stump of the tree are still visible. The front of the building was neatly gardened and grassed and the backyard had an orchard and vegetable gardens. There was a 'lake' at the rear that was used for bathing and as a water supply. He was sad that the place had deteriorated and felt it should have its life back as a library (Mr S 2011).

Mr B's story was that he was a student at the school in its first days of operation after 1947 and studied geography, history, politics, Hindi, Sanskrit and English. The pond at the back of the school was used for bathing and was fed by limestone-lined canal, which came across the back of the block. There were statues nearby of the father and grandfather of Raja Man Singh and the garden was replete with mango trees, guavas, dates and betel trees. Mango trees lined the boundary (and still do). The school ran 24 hours a day and, in the evening, he went home for food

and came back for more lessons. The students slept at the school. Although retired, he still visits regularly as he is 'too attached' to the old building and is disappointed with its condition. He said, 'no matter what happens I would never forget this place' (Mr B 2011).

Mr K is from the Scheduled Castes and was at the school on a government scholarship for Dalit people. He became an engineer, but since retirement, he is now the village matchmaker. He relates that when India achieved independence in 1947, the court building passed from the control of the landowner to the new Indian Government. It was sold for a reported 10,000 Rupees and was to be used as a school. Half the funds were raised by the village and the other half by the government. Funding was set aside for maintenance and the construction of a boundary fence. Apparently, this was in the hands of a development officer who used the money for 'other projects'. Mr K is angry that the maintenance money was syphoned off. This part of the story is also a matter of local lore and disappointment. He and Mr S are cynical that somewhere in the dark recesses of the bureaucracy, there are papers that falsely say that a boundary fence was constructed at the school when it was not. At night, the teachers slept in the front rooms and the children on the verandahs. They went outside for toileting. He also describes the pool at the backyard as a 'lake' surrounded by fruit trees. Mr K says that the building is an important landmark and should be kept as a library (Mr K 2011).

Nine of the 25 villagers surveyed described themselves as 'grihani', or 'housewife', and the rest were men – mostly farmers, although two were construction workers, one was a teacher in a private school and there were two students. Everybody knew the building and only one said that they never visited and did not know much about it because she was from another village. Fifteen people related a version of the story of its past life as a court of law built by the Raja or king and then sold by him to the government and the village as a school. Some told romantic stories of the place as a palace built by the king for his queen who bathed in a pool in its grounds. In one story, the king's elephants drank from the pool (Curtin University 2011d). Most knew the place as the old school although some had other descriptions including, palace, havalli (mansion or house) and the previously mentioned 'fifty-two dwar' or 52 doors. Some remembered it as a beautiful place with a lavish garden where they played as children. The majority reported that they still visited the place occasionally – most usually every one or two months. One woman had stories of how villagers used to gather at the pond when it was a school, dangle their feet in the water, eat the mangoes and solve village problems – carrying on its tradition as a place of resolution (Curtin University 2011e). Another liked to walk to the building and sit on the roof with friends (Curtin University 2011f). One villager related how he liked to go to the school when he was upset because the peaceful surroundings helped him sort out his feelings (Curtin University 2011g). Only one person did not respond to a question about its future use (Curtin University 2011h). The rest were in no doubt that the place deserved to be reused as a place associated with education. The general feeling of sadness and frustration at its condition and the view that it should be reused for women's education was endorsed by both male and female workshops held on the last day of the visit (Curtin University 2011c).

Of the 20 children surveyed, thirteen were female and all were below the age of eight. Obviously, since the building was in the school grounds, all played there and knew it intimately. Some knew the building as 'fifty-two doors' and most thought it beautiful, liked its 'design' and carvings and used it as a place for playing games

such as hide and seek and dreaming about kings and queens. One child related how peacocks danced on its roof and left feathers that they collected. In their narratives, children wanted it to be re-used as a school – some suggesting that it should teach sewing and cooking (Curtin University 2011b).

As foreshadowed earlier, these narratives suggest that there are a number of underlying frames, which help to mediate them and through which they may be understood. One of these is official corruption – something quite blatant in Indian life and a thorny political problem. The money earmarked for building maintenance and the boundary fence of the old school building disappeared and this has contributed to the decline of the place. Narratives about this aspect are told as a matter of fact and are ironically related – although the sentiment of loss is palpable. Loss is also tangible in many narratives that appear to be 'nostalgic' about the building's history, the condition of the place and its use as a place of memory. However, it can be argued that nostalgia is much more complicated than a simple wistful remembrance of the past. Moreover, the agency of nostalgia may be a useful frame through which to discuss the narratives about the place and understand its cultural significance. If narratives are the means by which people structure their understanding of the world, then abstract frames such as nostalgia may mediate those narratives and give them a particular and local meaning.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia is often viewed as an emotive form of remembering where people pine for past things as a salve to the rapid pace of change in the world – an element that also drives heritage (Lowenthal 1998, 6). Hewison (1987, 47) famously argued that nostalgia for the past was a generator of the heritage industry and its action was to muddy history and act as a break to the future. The backward-looking influence of nostalgia was seen as a signal of national decline. While generally scathing of nostalgia as showing contempt for the present and suspicion of the future, Lowenthal did admit that it had a positive side as a 'buffer for social upheaval' after catastrophes, helping to re-build identities (Lowenthal 1985, 13). Stewart (2007, 23) reinforces nostalgia's relationship to narrative and positions it as a loss – a form of repetitive narrative that has an origin that is 'always absent'. A utopia and ideal that has a lack of 'fixity and closure: nostalgia is the desire for desire'.

A recent critique by Boym (2007, 12) characterises modern nostalgia as 'mourning for the impossibility of mythical return', and of the loss of 'an enchanted world with clear borders and values'. For Boym, 'nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement' and she links this to its use for displaced people to cope with the impossibility of homecoming (Boym 2001, xvii). However, she argues that, while nostalgia is linked to identity, it need not always be about the past – nostalgia can be both retrospective and prospective. It is more complex than a naive longing and can be characterised by two strands – restorative and reflective nostalgia (Boym 2001, xviii). Both share similar 'triggers of memory and symbols' but offer different interpretations. Restorative nostalgia is immersed in an emotive longing for the past that preserves truth and tradition. It attempts to restore the lost world of the past through national mythology and ritual, which re-tells legendary pasts and through the reconstruction of lost artefacts – such as destroyed buildings. Restorative nostalgia can be linked to nationalist movements and the re-establishment of lost origins or the mirage of homeland. In this nostalgic category, there is little distinction allowed between national and individual memory (Boym 2001, 43).

On the other hand, reflective nostalgia 'suggests a new flexibility – not the re-establishment of stasis' (Boym 2001, 49). It recognises the distance to the past and its elusiveness in the present, and resists the temptation to re-build. It is more interested in creatively using 'ruins' as a narrative between past, present and future. Boym is clear that these categories are not absolute, but are tendencies that may overlap. Her thesis diverges from Nora's view that national narratives spawn social memory through memorialisation, and she sees reflective nostalgia as a narrative of identity that offers a more reflective interplay between the collective and the personal – 'nostalgic memories exist independently of a state that attempts to harness them' (Legg 2004, 100). The upshot of this is that nostalgia may have a more positive role in brokering an intimate interplay between the individual, the shared experience of community and a prospective role for nostalgia. While restorative nostalgia has the tendency to restore places to their original glory, reflective nostalgia is more interested in adapting and recycling 'modern ruins' for the future (Boym 2007, 17).

In light of the above, it can be argued that reflective nostalgia is a vehicle that mediates many of the narratives flowing around and through the school building. As previously discussed, villagers' stories narrate experience of the place in the past and the present. However, what emerges most strongly is a regard for the future of the place – mostly as a place of learning. While there are diverse opinions on its present value to the community and as a place of memory, there is an overwhelming agreement that it should be re-used. Loss is still a narrative frame for understanding the place but this is strongly tempered by its prospect as a vehicle for salvation. In other words, a reflective strand of nostalgia negotiates villagers' narratives, and mediates them in terms of a potential for the place to, once again, offer a way out of poverty. In this understanding, the past, present and future are – in their view – united. There are strong strands of identity and memory weaving through the narrative experience of the place but they are intimately fused with its future use. Here, the experience of loss and frustration is tempered through its potential to become a positive force for the community.

Conclusion

While the project has only reached a fraction of the village and there were difficulties in obtaining the survey sample, it is still an indication of the meaning that the old school building may hold. It is well regarded and they feel loss and frustration at its condition. Most were cognisant of its past history and most held intimate connetions with the place. Though the authorities have abandoned it, the building is regularly used as a playground for children. People visit it as an outing or to reminisce in a quiet space. The remaining mango trees in the yard still bear fruit and are harvested. It is strongly suggested that these narratives are integral with the place and form part of its life and being – they are not additives. Moreover, in narrative, we get a type of 'meaning making', which is allied to the stories that people tell about places. These are stories from people who are intimate with the place – it is not a history. As previously discussed, it is not the veracity of the historical account that is at stake here but that the meaning of this place comes from the stories that flow through its spaces. In Stewart's terms, narrative takes the villagers' relationship with the building 'behind' and 'beyond' its immediate presence into a world both nostalgic and future.

It could be expected that the diversity of class and culture in the village would have resulted in diverse views on the future role of the building. However, while views were divergent on the exact nature of re-use (community centre, library, women's education, children's education or technical education,), the primary theme was education. Although one villager suggested it should 'go back to being a court' and the king should return to 'make decisions for the area' (Curtin University 2011h), in both men and women's workshops it was a common theme that education was a priority and that any future purpose should give women a chance to become employable (Curtin University 2011c).[3]

Although there was a strong sentiment that the place should be re-used for the benefit of the people, any notion of an accurate heritage reconstruction did not colour this suggestion. Conversations with villagers indicated that, while there were romantic attachments to the place, there were no sentimental attachments to a 'restoration' of the place. There was a tendency to be more concerned with its value as a re-used building, which would become a meaningful place that would provide them with the tools to break from the cycle of poverty (Curtin University 2011c).

It should be reiterated that the above findings are contingent on the vagaries of language translation and interpretation. As previously mentioned, this analysis must be approached in the light of possible inaccuracy in language translation and a perceived social and cultural gap between the researchers and the villagers.

As this paper argues, their narratives of memory and loss can be seen as arbitrated by its potential future. Those narratives may be understood as mediated by a reflective nostalgia of the place – as proposed by Boym. This understanding of narrative, as a reflective critique of nostalgia – a nostalgia that proposes a future – is valuable to understand stories as an interpenetration of their memories of the place, the present and its future. The notion of reflective nostalgia also paves the way for an adaptive use of places rather than reconstruction – a regard for the nostalgia of a ruin – but one that serves the future.

Narrative has the power to *make visible* imagined action and to 'shape the way we perceive our relations to the landscape' (Stewart 2007, 25). Through an examination of the stories surrounding the old school building, as told by villagers, there is the possibility of narrative as an alternative route to understanding the cultural significance of a place.

Notes

1. Actual names of those interviewed have been suppressed to observe Curtin ethics approval conditions for this project.
2. Mr A confirmed that his grandfather's name was Raja Man Singh and that he built a number of buildings in and around the village including the guesthouse. It is interesting that some villagers interviewed remembered the place as a court of law and not as a guesthouse. This may be because its function as a place of power is remembered over its more mundane function as a dwelling. The conflict between the stories also highlights possible problems with translation and interpretation where according to Mr S the building was a courthouse where guests stayed and for Mr A it was a guesthouse which occasionally became a court.
3. The predominant theme of education in the villagers survey and workshops may be because they perceive the current school to be inadequate. The women's workshop cited a lack of teachers, books and facilities at the existing school. Also, IRead have championed education in the village. The women's workshop suggested that the building could be a 'community facility for teaching trade skills such as sewing, embroidery, computing, as a

possible refuge during monsoon and as accommodation for wedding parties'. The men's workshop suggested that the building could be a 'place of learning for the women, since it was a safe place for them to travel to and from their houses' (Curtin University 2011c).

Notes on contributor

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