
ORIGINAL RESEARCH REPORT

The California Missions: Public Attitudes Toward Perceived Authenticity, Sacredness, and Uses of Historic Religious Sites

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Psychological research can be used to understand people's perceptions and attitudes toward historic environments. Understanding the public's attitudes toward historic sites can help to improve decisions about the preservation and management of these places. This paper reviews a series of studies examining three historic Catholic Missions in central California: Missions San Miguel, San Luis Obispo, and La Purisima. These missions have very different histories and uses. Mission San Miguel is one of the best preserved of the California Missions; however, its fragility limits use of the Mission by its parish. Mission San Luis Obispo has been substantially rebuilt over the years; it has an active parish and is a focal point for tourism in the city. Mission La Purisima was destroyed by an earthquake in the 1800s and rebuilt as a WPA project in the 1930s. It is currently a state historic park located in a rural setting. The research on these missions examined perceptions of authenticity and sacredness of the places. These perceptions were linked to attitudes about appropriate uses of the missions (for example, the appropriateness of tourism) and how the missions should be managed.

Keywords: Historic Preservation; perception; authenticity; sacredness

1. Introduction

Many preservationist scholars advocate that community input should be included in decisions about historic preservation because community engagement is fundamental for the decision-making and implementation processes related to historic places (Wells, 2010). Community members may perceive different degrees of importance to preservation features. Historic preservation requires making decisions about how historic sites should be preserved, used, and modified. Professionals with expertise in historic preservation serve an important role in doing this, but it is also important to include the community in the decision process because they are users of the sites and their support is needed for implementation.

Psychological research has an important ability to help understand a variety of issues related to historic preservation. Methods include attitude surveys of the public, both community members and tourists; perceptual studies that examine esthetics and perceived authenticity of the buildings; observations of the use and impacts of use on the places; and

interviews to get an in-depth understanding of user and visitor experience and the opinions of key stakeholders.

There are a variety of benefits to studying the attitudes of community members and visitors to historic sites. Attitude surveys provide a way of capturing the public's perceptions of authenticity and their beliefs about how the historic sites should be managed. This can help to document the importance of historic preservation and identify the factors related to importance; show the public's view of appropriate uses and acceptable alterations; and demonstrate community and political support for their preservation and maintenance (Levi & del Rio, 2019).

Community attitude research shows that the public has positive attitudes toward historic preservation. They view historic buildings as more attractive than modern buildings and want to see them preserved (Levi, 2005). Architectural critics are often concerned about the impacts of fake historic buildings. They believe these buildings may reduce support for historic preservation. Construction of fake historic buildings is increasing due to its popularity with tourists (Main Street, Disneyland) and the emphasis on contextualism in the design review process. However, research shows the public has a positive view of fake historic buildings, and is often unable to distinguish between real and fake historic buildings. The

public supports contextualism and historic preservation, and does not see a conflict.

This research examines a number of psychological issues related to historic preservation and the public's perception and attitudes toward preservation. By studying people's attitudes toward three California missions with very different histories and uses, the following research questions were examined:

What factors affect people's perception of the authenticity of historic sites?

What factors affect people's perception of sacredness at historic religious sites?

How do perceptions of authenticity and sacredness of historic sites relate to attitudes about the appropriateness of tourist, educational, and religious uses of the sites?

How do perceptions of the authenticity and sacredness of the sites relate to the acceptability of modifications for ADA accessibility, earthquake protection, and tourist services?

2. Research Methods

The research presented here examines three historic California Missions. These three historic missions are located along the California central coast, about one hour's drive apart from each other. The missions have substantial differences from a historic preservation perspective. Although many of the California Missions fell into decay during the 1800s, they were revitalized during the Mission revival era in the 1920s and 30s (Johnson, 1979). The missions are important religious sites that support local Catholic parishes, historic sites that are studied by school children throughout the state, and tourist sites that attract thousands of visitors.

This paper presents results from two research projects. Results from some of these studies have been published in *Focus*, the journal of Cal Poly's City and Regional Planning Department. The first project includes onsite visits of the three missions, behavioral observations, interviews with visitors, and site evaluations conducted by students in an honors course on historic sacred places at Cal Poly (Levi, 2012). In addition, surveys were given to 56 students in two upper level GE classes at Cal Poly. The survey participants were given descriptions of the three missions at the beginning of a survey describing their history and current use. They were asked: "You have out-of-town visitors from the East Coast who want to see one of the California Missions. You want them to have an 'authentic' experience of visiting a Mission. Which of the three Missions described best captures the California Mission experience? Explain your answer."

The second research project used a survey to examine the importance of historic preservation and the factors related to it, the appropriateness of the uses at the historic missions, and the acceptability of modifications to the missions (Levi & del Rio, 2019). The participants in the study were given descriptions of the three missions at the beginning of the survey describing their history and current use. These descriptions and the attitude ratings

were randomly presented to the survey participants in different orders; no photos accompanied the descriptions.

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

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

The following are the descriptions of the three California Missions used in both of these research projects:

Mission San Luis Obispo is in downtown SLO. The mission has been extensively rebuilt and modified over the years. In the late 1800s, it was modernized after damage from an earthquake. In the 1930s the main chapel was reconstructed in a historic style with reinforced concrete and its interior was redesigned 10 years ago in a non-historic style. The Catholic parish is active in the historic buildings and religious services occur regularly in the church. The complex holds a small gift shop and museum next to the church's main entrance. In front of the mission, a plaza built by the City in the 1970s is used for community events.

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

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

3. Authenticity and Perceived Authenticity

Authenticity is an important concept in both historic preservation and tourism. There is an important distinction between historic authenticity (or the way experts in historic preservation define authenticity) and perceived authenticity (or the public's perceptions and beliefs about what is authentic). For historic preservationists, authenticity is used to make decisions about which places should be preserved and the acceptability of modifications to the place (Wells, 2010). Historic preservationists use multiple definitions of authenticity to evaluate places; however, the most common definition focuses on the physical dimensions – are the historic structures and artifacts intact or have they been changed over time? Preservationists may also consider whether the historic uses or functions continue (McKercher & du Cros, 2002).

Authenticity is traditionally determined by an objective analysis of the site performed by historic preservation professionals (Wells, 2010). This objective analysis focuses on the original materials that make up the site and important events that occurred there. According to UNESCO criteria (World Heritage Centre, 2019), determining authenticity concerns evaluating truthful information about the cultural heritage of a site. The attributes that should be considered in this analysis include “form and design; materials and substance; use and function; traditions, techniques and management systems; location and setting; language and other forms of intangible heritage’ spirit and feeling; and other internal and external factors”. It is noted that spirit and feeling do not lend themselves easily to objective, expert analysis.

For tourists, perceived authenticity is a criterion for the selection and evaluation of the cultural tourism sites they visit (Shackley, 2001). Perceived authenticity focuses on the factors that influence why people experience a place as authentic. Tourists want to visit authentic sites, but they may not have knowledge or ability to know whether a place is historically authentic (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). The meaning of the place to the local community relates to its authenticity (Levi, 2012). The California missions provide a good example of the challenges of evaluating the perceived authenticity of a place.

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

The cultural background and other characteristics of the visitors impact perceived authenticity and their ability to interpret historic sites (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). For example, non-Christian visitors may have difficulty interpreting the meaning of religious symbols at the California missions. Knowledge of the site's history affects

people's evaluations of it. People are not always able to tell whether a building is historic or modern construction (Levi, 2005). For example, most visitors are unaware that the current chapel at Mission San Luis Obispo was built in the 1930s. Tourists also vary on the motivation for their visit, and the perception of a mission depends on whether one is visiting as a tourist or a religious pilgrim (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). Finally, perceived authenticity is influenced by your experience when visiting the site: visiting Mission San Luis Obispo is a different experience if you arrive during a religious service versus a “Concerts in the Plaza” event (Levi & del Rio, 2019).

Historic sites are protected and maintained to preserve the historic authenticity of the sites. The professional definition of authenticity is important for making decisions about which sites should be protected, how the site should be maintained, and appropriate uses of the sites. However, the public may have difficulty understanding the criteria used in these expert evaluations (Wells, 2010). It is important for historic preservation professionals to understand the public's perception of authenticity of the sites (Levi & Kocher, 2013). The public's perceived authenticity affects public support for historic preservation of the site; public preferences about how the sites should be selected, maintained, and managed; and strategies for communicating with the public about appropriate uses of the site.

3.1. Research Results

It is not always clear to professionals what is historically authentic, so we should not be surprised that people vary on their evaluations of perceived authenticity. It is difficult to determine which of these missions is most historically authentic. There are good reasons to consider all three of these missions as authentic, and inauthentic.

The students in the honors class on historic sacred places became fairly sophisticated evaluators of the authenticity of historic places and historic preservation issues related to the missions (Levi, 2012). They rated Mission San Miguel as the most historically authentic, followed by Mission San Luis Obispo and then Mission La Purisima. Mission San Miguel was viewed as having historic buildings, but limited access and maintenance issues disrupted one's experience of the place. Mission San Luis Obispo was viewed as authentic because it is a functioning parish with close ties in the community, but there have been many modifications to the historic structures. Mission La Purisima had the most historic feel, but it was considered an inauthentic place because of when and why it was constructed. Some of the students focused on the architectural characteristics of the place, while others focused on the religious history and current use of the place. Their experience of the sites varied by what happened to them on the day they were visiting.

In the second study, students who read descriptions of the three missions rated Mission San Miguel as more historically authentic than the other two Missions (**Table 1**). However, in the first study, students were asked: “Which of the three missions described best captures the California Mission experience?” (Levi, 2012). Mission La Purisima was selected by over half of the students

Table 1: Ratings of Perceived Authenticity.

Missions	Perceived Authenticity*	Best Mission Experience
San Miguel	80%	14%
San Luis Obispo	39%	34%
La Purisima	43%	52%

* Percent of participants who viewed the mission as an authentic place.

because its rural setting captures the historic lifestyle of the missions. Mission San Miguel was selected by a third of the students because it has the most historically authentic buildings. Mission San Luis Obispo was selected by about 10% of the students because although it has been substantially modified, it is still an active religious place that is used by the community.

The relationship between perceived authenticity and the importance of historic preservation is especially strong (Levi & del Rio, 2019). The more the mission was viewed as authentic, the more participants believed historic preservation of the place was important. Historic preservation was also viewed as more important for Missions San Miguel and San Luis Obispo than Mission La Purisima.

4. Sacredness of the Sites

The California Missions are historic religious sites that are experienced as sacred places by the community and visitors. Historic religious sites require balancing the needs of historic preservation, community religious use of the site, and the tourist experience. The sacredness of these places is defined by the experience of users and visitors, the behaviors that occur there, and the meanings associated with the place by various groups. The perception of sacredness of a place can be fundamentally seen as an experiential phenomenon, a behavior setting, or an aspect of place identity (Levi & Kocher, 2013). These three perspectives are not mutually exclusive; they can be used together to understand why a place is considered sacred.

To most social scientists, sacredness is an experiential phenomenon that arises from people’s interactions with a place (Carmichael, Hubert, & Reeves, 1994). The experience of sacredness is often described as a feeling of awe when being in the place. Awe-inspiring environmental features overwhelm the observer and create a sense of being a small part of a larger, spiritual system (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). This experience depends on people’s individual and cultural background (Shackley, 2001). Sacred places promote different types of emotional experiences. Religious tourists experience a “sense of God’s presence” and respect for the spiritual values of the place, while even non-religious visitors find sacred sites to be spiritually alive, feel a sense of peace or serenity, or find the place to be awe-inspiring (Sharpley, 2010).

Sacred places are behavior settings whose meaning arises from the religious practices being performed there. Sacred places provide meaning, support, and a context for performing religious activities (Rapoport, 1982). The meaning of the place arises from its religious use, while the place helps to structure the social relationships and

activities (Bremer, 2006). The behavioral definition of sacred places is used in the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, which defines sacred places as sites where Native Americans have traditionally performed religious activities (Hughes & Swan, 1986). This perspective makes clear the importance of preserving both the historic structure and the religious practices in order to maintain the sacredness of the place (Levi & Kocher, 2011). When religious practices stop occurring, the place’s identity shifts from being a sacred to a historic place.

Sacredness is an aspect of a place’s identity, or the meanings and feelings associated with a place by a group of people (Hague, 2005). Sacredness may be viewed as a characteristic of the place because of the presence of spiritual forces, religions can consecrate places to make them sacred, and historic events may cause a place to become viewed as sacred by the community. All of these factors relate to the California Missions (Levi & Kocher, 2013). For example, Christian religions declare or consecrate places as sacred (Vukonic, 2006). Religious authorities sanctify these places, and they can be deconsecrated through rituals if no longer in use. Historic religious sites can become sacred due to an event that occurred there (such as a miracle) or the presence of sacred relics and religious icons.

4.1. Research Results

Students in the honors class analyzed how the missions related to the three perspectives toward sacredness. All three of the missions create the experience of a sacred place through the design of the buildings and the symbols represented there. Visitors may feel awe and a sense of reverence visiting these places. Missions San Luis Obispo and San Miguel also meet the other two criteria. They have active parishes that use the sites for worship. Their communities view them as religious places. Mission La Purisima is a state park, so there are no worshipers and it is often viewed as a historic park rather than a sacred place.

Survey results in the second project found that Missions San Luis Obispo and San Miguel were viewed as more religious or sacred places than Mission La Purisima (Table 2). The perception of sacredness was

Table 2: Ratings of Sacredness.

Missions	Perceived Sacredness*
San Miguel	55%
San Luis Obispo	61%
La Purisima	35%

* Percent of participants who viewed the mission as a sacred place.

positively correlated with perceived authenticity and the importance of historic preservation. This is one reason why historic preservation was viewed as more important for Missions San Miguel and San Luis Obispo than Mission La Purisima.

Observations and interviews at the missions identified factors that negatively affected the perception of sacredness there. Preserving the perceived sacredness of the missions relates to the three perspectives. From an experiential perspective, overcrowding and inappropriate tourist behavior disrupts people's experience of place. Maintaining serenity requires limiting disruptions caused by tourists, managing noise and disruptions from adjacent uses to the site, and preserving the natural features surrounding the place. The behavioral perspective toward sacredness makes clear the importance of preserving both the historic structure and the religious practices in order to maintain the perception of sacredness. Although tourists highly value being able to observe and participate in religious practices, their presence can be disruptive to the local community of religious practitioners. Preserving sacredness from a place identity perspective relates to the continued religious use of a site. When religious practices stop occurring, the place's identity shifts from being a sacred to historic or tourist place.

5. Appropriate Uses and Modifications to Historic Sites

The California Missions are hybrid environments that are historic, religious and tourist places (Levi & Kocher, 2009). Historic sacred places help to provide meaning to a culture and a place for community and religious activities (Bianca, 2001). Understanding what is important to preserve about them is a vital component of historic preservation. Management of these historic sites requires balancing the needs of historic preservation, religious and community uses of the sites, and tourism. In addition, managers must make decisions about the appropriateness of modifications to the sites to accommodate these various uses.

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

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

history and culture of California (Levi, 2012). A stronger interpretation focus on the religious meaning of the missions may help to reduce inappropriate tourist behavior by encouraging respect for the historic and spiritual value of the place.

Continued use of historic religious sites is important for both the tourists and local community (Levi & Kocher, 2009). Religious use by the local community provides meaning to the site and supports preservation and maintenance. Although tourists seek authentic experiences, commercialization by the tourist industry may reduce the perceived authenticity of the site. Tourists have a mixed view of this commercialization, but often see it as incompatible with the religious experience of historic sites. Religious and tourism uses of the missions can coexist as long as there is clear separation between the religious and secular activities (Levi & del Rio, 2019).

5.1. Research Results

Survey results in the second study found that the majority felt that religious use, educational use, and tourism were all appropriate uses the three California Missions (Table 3). However, religious use was considered less appropriate at Mission La Purisima (which is a state historic park) than the other two missions.

Most of the student participants believed that modifications for ADA accessibility and earthquake resistance were acceptable (Table 4). These modifications were viewed as less acceptable for Mission San Miguel than the other two Missions. Modifications to add educational facilities were viewed as acceptable by over half of the participants at all of the missions. Modifications to add tourist facilities were not viewed as acceptable by most of the participants, especially for Mission San Miguel. When modifications are made to the missions, most of the participants felt that the changes should be historic looking, rather than modern (Levi & del Rio, 2019).

Table 3: Appropriate Uses of the Missions.

	San Luis Obispo	San Miguel	La Purisima
Religious Use	66%	55%	47%
Educational Use	58%	61%	68%
Tourism	59%	51%	64%

Table 4: Acceptable Modifications to the Missions.

	San Luis Obispo	San Miguel	La Purisima
ADA Modifications	76%	59%	73%
Earthquake Resistance	83%	71%	78%
Tourist Facilities	10%	5%	15%
Educational Facilities	50%	52%	56%
Historic Looking Modifications	65%	70%	73%

6. Conclusions

Psychological research provides useful information about the public's views of the importance of historic preservation, the factors that affect the perception of authenticity and sacredness at historic sites, and how historic sites should be managed. The research reported here shows that people have strong support for historic preservation of the California Missions and that people discriminate in their perceptions and attitudes about the three missions. Understanding these differences helps to define how people perceive the authenticity and sacredness of historic sites. Factors related to perceived authenticity and sacredness help to explain the different beliefs about appropriate uses and management of these missions.

The strong public support for historic preservation in this research was positively related to the perceived authenticity and sacredness of the sites. All three of the missions were perceived as authentic, but for different reasons. Mission San Miguel was composed of historic materials, Mission San Luis Obispo continued to operate as a religious site, and Mission La Purisima created the experience of history. The factors that hurt perceived authenticity of these missions included physical modifications, lack of religious activities, and impacts of tourism. The perception of sacredness at the missions was supported by creating the experience of awe and reverence through design and symbols. Missions San Miguel and San Luis Obispo were viewed as more sacred because of continued religious use of the sites. Mission La Purisima was primarily viewed as a historic, rather than a sacred, site. The factors that disrupted the perception of sacredness included overcrowding, inappropriate tourist behavior, commercialization, and lack of religious use.

People were open to a variety of uses of these historic missions. They did not insist on solely keeping the historic religious use. They were open to tourism and educational uses of the missions. However, there were concerns about the impacts of too much tourism on the experience of these places. There was support for modifications of the missions to increase access for people with disabilities and for earthquake protection to improve safety. However, there was less support for modifications of Mission San Miguel because of its pristine and fragile condition. Modifications to support tourism were generally not supported by the participants. When making modifications, the public supported making the changes to look historic to fit in with the existing site.

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

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

Historic religious sites use a variety of approaches to managing the conflicts between historic preservation, religious and social use by the local community, and tourism. One approach to managing these conflicts is through how the site is interpreted to visitors. The California Missions are advertised as cultural tourist sites and often interpreted as historic sites. A stronger interpretation focus on the religious meaning of these places may help to reduce inappropriate tourist behavior, reduce the conflicts between tourism and the local religious community, and encourage respect for the historic and spiritual value of the missions.

Data Accessibility Statement

The attitude survey data from the studies reported here are available from the author by request at dlevi@calpoly.edu.

Competing Interests

The author is one of the editors of this special issue of *Collabra: Psychology*.

Author Contributions

The author conducted this research project and written report.

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