

Sacred Spaces of New England: Artistic Research, Cultural Heritage, and Virtual Reality Panoramic Photography

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Abstract

Artistic research is a methodology that integrates artistic activities within either the research process or its outcomes. By using New England's sacred spaces as a case study for the documentation and interpretation of cultural heritage, this paper provides an overview of the author's ongoing Sacred Spaces of New England project, examines how New England's sacred spaces are increasingly becoming "at-risk" heritage sites, and considers the value of documenting and mapping them using virtual reality panoramic photography and associated technologies.

Keywords

Sacred Spaces, Cultural Heritage, Collective Memory, Artistic Research, New England, Virtual Reality Panoramic Photography

Introduction

A region is not only geographic; it also exists as a conceptual space that is culturally constructed and whose identity may shift over time. In the United States, historic New England is often remembered as a beacon for religious freedom as the Puritans arrived to escape religious persecution. However, historical record reveals that most faiths and denominations have had to overcome adversity and persevere as they planted roots within the New England area. While religion has played a major role in New England's history and cultural heritage, today, according to some studies, New England is considered the least religious region in the United States—potentially placing a significant number of sacred spaces within the area into the category of "at-risk" heritage sites.

Sacred Spaces of New England is an online artistic research platform developed to document, map and archive sacred spaces of New England using virtual reality panoramic photography, hypermedia systems, and related technologies (seththompson.info/sacredspacesne/). The purpose is to record and re-present New England's religious and secular places that elicit contemplation, reflection, and inspiration. Rather than to be a comprehensive survey, the intent of this long-term project is to be a personal

exploration of sacred spaces within New England that showcases the region's diversity and rich heritage.

By utilizing the concept of artistic research in which Sacred Spaces of New England is used as platform to represent findings, this paper will provide an overview of the Sacred Spaces of New England project, discuss how New England's sacred spaces are increasingly becoming "at-risk" heritage sites, and consider the value of documenting and mapping New England's sacred spaces using virtual reality panoramic photography and hypermedia systems.

Collective Memory and Identity in New England

New England, a region named by Captain John Smith in 1616, consists of six states within the northeastern United States: Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont. New England's jagged coastline extends across five states, and its rolling hills and mountains may be found in all six, with lakes, hills, and sandy beaches peppered throughout. Many travel to New England to partake in such local culinary delights as clam chowder and lobster as well as to enjoy the breathtaking colors of the turning red and yellow leaves during autumn.

Beginning with the noted arrival in 1620 of the Pilgrims, who were fleeing religious persecution, the region has been considered home to some of the earliest English settlements. It has a rich maritime history and has played a significant role in the development of public education and the abolitionist movement in the United States. These events and others have been important to the formation of the United States' historical narrative and national identity. [1]

In addition to the Native American population, New England had been composed of a largely homogenous English demographic until the mid-nineteenth century. Since that time, it has accrued a diverse population due to migration, especially during the Industrial Revolution. In

Imagining New England, Joseph Conforti traces New England's shifting identity from the arrival of the Pilgrims to the mid-twentieth century to reveal a complex history that has been simplified to serve various political and cultural agendas at different points in the region's history, which is manifested in works by such individuals as Jedidiah Morse (1761–1826), a notable geographer whose textbooks were essential reading for students in the United States, and Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896), an abolitionist and author who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. [2]

For example, Conforti argues that Jedidiah Morse, considered the “father of American geography,” used geography to establish a collective identity for the fledgling United States, using New England as his primary vehicle. He was the first to define New England as a cultural region. [3] Conforti writes, “Morse’s textbook amalgam of republicanized Puritan moralism and regional cultural imperialism permeated Federalist politics ... Morse commanded the field of American geography and his texts propagated the region’s claim to republican preeminence.” [4] Morse placed New England—especially Connecticut—at the forefront as the model for guiding the political development of the American republic for other U.S. regions to follow. [5] While Morse’s work contributed to many of the civic ideals held by the nation, his position ethnicized New England’s history as being “almost universally of English descent,” countering the United States’ civic nationhood. [6] Conforti argues that Morse positioned New England in his textbooks as “America’s America” and superior to any other region in the country—creating a cultural narrative that has withstood many generations, despite its inaccuracy. [7]

Political and cultural narrative constructions, when accepted as truth, are generally a product of collective memory, which is the result of socialization through education, traditions, and customs, including public ceremonies and monuments. [8] It is important to consider how a group collectively forgets by excluding or silencing alternative perspectives or versions of events from a social group’s memory. [9] A consequence of identity narratives, as seen in history, is that they not only homogenize groups of people from potentially diverse backgrounds but also create an “other,” which can easily lead to prejudice, stereotyping, and alienation. [10]

A region’s endeavor to preserve its past creates an identity from which emerge unity and a sense of self drawn from events and cultural symbols, both tangible and intangible. A region’s identity and cultural heritage work hand in hand.

Defining New England’s Sacred Spaces and Their “At-Risk” Status

The word *sacred* stems from the Latin word *sacer*, which essentially means “that which is set apart from the ordinary world.” [11] Within the context of this paper, sacred spaces are defined as both natural and built environments that are transformed into systems of formal arrangements that are sometimes associated with individual religions and which fall under four categories: commemorative, congregational, service, and natural spaces. These spaces, which may be either secular or religious, may also be considered works of art. Commemorative spaces may honor or memorialize a place, event, or person, such as the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, or the Ka’bah in Mecca. Congregational spaces are assembly places; they may be used for such events as community gatherings or worship (New England meetinghouses, churches, synagogues, and temples, for example). Service spaces are multipurpose structures such as monasteries, museums, retreats, and educational centers that are sacred in nature. Natural spaces are places found in nature. For example, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism associate sacredness with actual geographic features, such as mountains. [12] To date, the Sacred Spaces of New England project has been focusing on constructed assembly spaces such as chapels, churches, meetinghouses, mosques, synagogues, and temples, but will expand to include natural spaces as the project further develops.

The colonial meetinghouse has played an important role in the public and cultural affairs of New England since the arrival of the English in the seventeenth century. These spaces were used for town business, religious worship, and discussion of local issues. Nevertheless, many of these structures underwent an ecclesiastical transformation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moving from plain, unpainted, rectangular buildings to the Georgian-style regional icons with bell towers and steeples found in many New England town centers today. [13]

While New England’s population was predominately of Anglo-Saxon Protestant descent until the mid-nineteenth century, its population began to diversify with the mass migration of French Canadians, Irish, Italians, Poles, Russian Jews, and others who settled in New England in the latter part of the nineteenth century in search of new opportunities in industrializing cities and mill towns. [14] Nevertheless, there are many exceptions to this migration generalization, which may be found in the Sacred Spaces of New England project, including the German Meeting House (1772) in Waldoboro, Maine, and the African Meeting House (1806) in Boston, Massachusetts (figures 1 and 2).



Fig. 1. Cropped Equirectangular Projection of the German Meeting House (1772) in Waldoboro, Maine. ©2019 Seth Thompson, Author.



Fig. 2. Equirectangular Projection of the African Meeting House (1806) in Boston, Massachusetts. ©2019 Seth Thompson, Author.

At the time of the United States 2000 census, the top five foreign-born New Englanders' countries of origin were Portugal (7.4%), Canada (7.2%), China (5.4%), Dominican Republic (5.3%), and Italy (4.4%). Additionally, the top five fastest-growing immigrant populations between 1990 and 2000 were Dominican Republic, China, Brazil, India, and Vietnam. [15] According to a November 2008 New England Public Policy Center Research Report entitled "A Portrait of New England's Immigrants," New England's immigrant population was growing faster than its American-born population. [16] Post-1965 immigrants have brought greater religious diversity to the United States with the establishment of Islamic mosques and Buddhist and Hindu temples. [17]

These religious institutions contribute to New England's evolving heritage and historical narrative. Nevertheless, many of New England's traditional religious sacred spaces are financially struggling and at risk of closing as New England becomes increasingly secular and attendance declines in American churches. [18] A 2008 survey conducted by Gallup that included more than 350,000 participants found that all six New England states (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont) ranked in the top ten least religious states in the country. [19] With this in mind, it is important to document these assembly spaces throughout New England, as they have played important roles in their communities and are now in danger of quietly disappearing from New England's cultural landscape.

Artistic Research and the Sacred Spaces of New England Project

Artistic research is a methodology that integrates artistic activities within either the research process or its outcomes. By using New England's sacred spaces as a case study, the Sacred Spaces of New England project utilizes an arts-informed inquiry approach developed in response to these questions: How can virtual reality panoramic photography be used in the digital documentation, preservation, and interpretation of sacred spaces? What is the interplay between a region's sacred spaces and its identity? The Sacred Spaces of New England project attempts to answer these questions using the following research methodologies:

1. Interdisciplinary literature review that encompasses broad topics such as art and architecture, digital media, heritage studies, American history, and nationalism.
2. Data collection including photo documentation using virtual reality panoramic photography techniques and technologies, interviews and email correspondences, and literature (printed and digital) about the individual sacred spaces.

Virtual reality panoramic photography is an effective tool for documenting sacred spaces, as it provides an immersive 360-degree comprehensive recording of a place in time—allowing the viewer to understand an environment as if experiencing it in the physical location. [20] The Sacred Spaces of New England project is an artistic research platform that documents, maps, and archives sacred spaces of New England using virtual reality panoramic photography, hypermedia systems, and related technologies in order to record and re-present New England's religious and secular places that elicit contemplation, reflection, and inspiration (figures 3 and 4).



Fig. 3. Screenshot of the Sacred Spaces of New England project's home page. ©2019 Seth Thompson, Author.

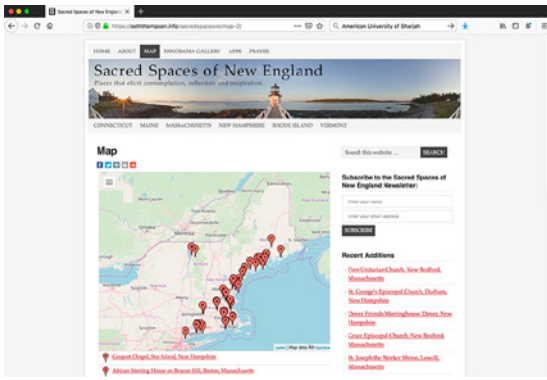


Fig. 4. Screenshot of the Sacred Spaces of New England project's map page. ©2019 Seth Thompson, Author.

These are the goals of the project:

1. Experiment with and develop user-friendly and accessible models for heritage preservation, interpretation, and dissemination that incorporate virtual reality panoramic photography and its associated technologies.
2. Document, interpret, and understand New England's rich cultural heritage and reveal its complexity through its sacred spaces.
3. Explore notions of the sacred, heritage, and civic nationalism within the context of New England.

Much like the educational stereoview sets of the early twentieth century published by Underwood & Underwood and Keystone Publishing Company, the Sacred Spaces of New England project includes immersive photo documentation and text descriptions of each of the sites and utilizes a map system. The project also incorporates contemporary technology including virtual reality panoramic photography and a digital map system housed in a web-based hypermedia system for accessibility, display, and presentation purposes. In addition, the project includes opportunities for immersive experiences using head-mounted displays such as Google Cardboard in conjunction with a user's mobile device.

Many of the sacred spaces depicted in the Sacred Spaces of New England project not only are architecturally significant but also contain stories that reflect their value to the community. A quintessential New England Congregational church (fig. 5) can be found on the town green in Madison, Connecticut (where this author was born and raised). St. Patrick Church (fig. 6) in Newcastle, Maine, is the site where the township, consisting of Protestants and Catholics, saved this Catholic church from arson in 1854 when an anti-Catholic sentiment swept the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. The Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (fig. 7) in Roxbury, Massachusetts, is a

mosque and community center founded in 2009 that draws over 1,500 worshippers from over 64 ethnicities for its Friday prayer services. Drawing on such histories, this project attempts to tell the rich and diverse story of New England through a documentation of New England's sacred spaces that embodies a civic nationalism of freedom, inclusion, and equality.



Fig. 5. Equirectangular Projection of the First Congregational Church of Madison (1838) in Madison, Connecticut. ©2019 Seth Thompson, Author.



Fig. 6. Equirectangular Projection of Saint Patrick's Church (1808) in Newcastle, Maine. ©2019 Seth Thompson, Author.



Fig. 7. Equirectangular Projection of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (2009) in Roxbury, Massachusetts. ©2019 Seth Thompson, Author.

The Preservation of Virtual Reality Panoramic Photography

In the early twentieth century, many people considered the painted panorama obsolete as new media innovations such

as film became the vogue. Consequently, it almost faced extinction and was nearly erased from cultural memory. This occurrence should serve as a gentle reminder to those involved in virtual reality panoramic photography projects that as hardware and software evolve, and with “industry-standard” file formats changing or becoming obsolete, precautions need to be taken to safeguard these digital cultural heritage projects for future generations—in regard to both content and value to the history of media arts. What is considered industry standard today may be obsolete tomorrow. For instance, since this author began working with virtual reality panoramic photography, the file format for display on the web has changed three times, from QuicktimeVR to Flash to HTML5. In order to ensure the longevity of the project’s digital assets, sustainability issues need to be addressed, especially in regard to migrating files to future storage and access systems so that the media objects retain their integrity.

In 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted a Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage concerning the “understanding that this digital heritage is at risk of being lost and that its preservation for the benefit of present and future generations is an urgent issue of worldwide concern ... that the disappearance of heritage in whatever form constitutes an impoverishment of the heritage of all nations.” [21] The strength of this Charter is that it recognizes the fragility of cultural products existing within the digital environment, which can easily become obsolete or extinct unless appropriate preservation and conservation actions are taken. An aspect of the Sacred Spaces of New England project is the creation of a sustainable model so that it can withstand the ever-changing technological environment of the web and contribute to the digital heritage preservation conversation.

Concluding Remarks

While the history of religious intolerance in New England is disheartening, the stance against bigotry found at the same time within its communities and leaders represents a sense of hope for this author. In a thoughtful letter written in 1790 to the Hebrew Congregations of Newport, Rhode Island, who were concerned about their future, George Washington wrote, “For happily the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.” [22] Dr. John Clarke, an advocate for religious freedom and author of the 1663 Rhode Island Royal Charter, wrote in the charter that “no person within the said colony, at any time hereafter shall be any wise molested [harassed], punished, disquieted,

or called in question, for any differences in opinion in matters of religion, and do not actually disturb the civil peace of our said colony.” [23] The Sacred Spaces of New England project attempts to show these ideals and aspirations through New England’s sacred spaces.

In the book *Imagining New England* Joseph Conforti eloquently argues, “We need a new narrative of how New England developed not only as a Puritan-Yankee city on a hill but also as an ethnic city by the mill.” [24] New England has a rich and colorful history that far goes beyond the Puritan-Yankee narrative that is typically associated with the region. The Sacred Spaces of New England project endeavors to show this narrative through its re-presentation of New England’s sacred spaces.

The Sacred Spaces of New England project not only seeks to document architecturally significant and at-risk sacred spaces but also endeavors to be a space for experimentation in pushing forward the medium of virtual reality panoramic photography for cultural heritage purposes. This author is commencing research on how to transition the website into a more immersive experience by incorporating opportunities to use a head-mounted display when viewing the website as well as investigating stereo virtual reality panoramic imaging to give greater visual depth to the panoramas—mimicking how our eyes receive data for depth perception. Another aspect of this author’s current research is to investigate the notion of “sacred geometry,” with an emphasis on the tradition of Islamic geometric pattern design drawing as it may relate to virtual reality panoramic photography’s two-dimensional image projections of the sacred spaces depicted. By using New England’s sacred sites as case studies, this author hopes to create a meaningful project that contributes to the media arts and heritage studies disciplines through digitally preserving and re-presenting cultural heritage using virtual reality panoramic imaging and associated technologies and that tells a more inclusive story of New England’s rich and diverse cultural heritage.

Notes

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