

APPLICATION OF SACRED LANDSCAPES IN MODERN CITIES

ABSTRACT

Many of the bustling metropolitan cities are bound to rapid urbanization that unavoidably change their culture, traditions, and, history. This extremely rapid transformation of social economic construct could lead to the diminishment and disappearance of urban cultural interactions, and thus poses a huge threat to big cities. Sacred landscapes can provide a solution towards preserving and protecting the core cultural values while, at the same time, dealing with new social challenges. A sacred landscape is a cultural construct that mirrors our memories and myths and is a treasury of intangible human values that nurture our lives. It connects elements of nature such as mountains, rivers, trees, and caves to human values such as religion, culture, and history.

Recent studies suggest that the concept of sacredness is associated with people's backgrounds, environmental elements, and cultural values. Critical to the notion of sacred landscape are the concepts of imaginary and cultural landscapes in which our sense of place and memories inhere. In this paper, we aim at finding some of the key and tangible values of sacred landscapes that can be applied to modern urban areas to permeate and preserve our cultural and social values.

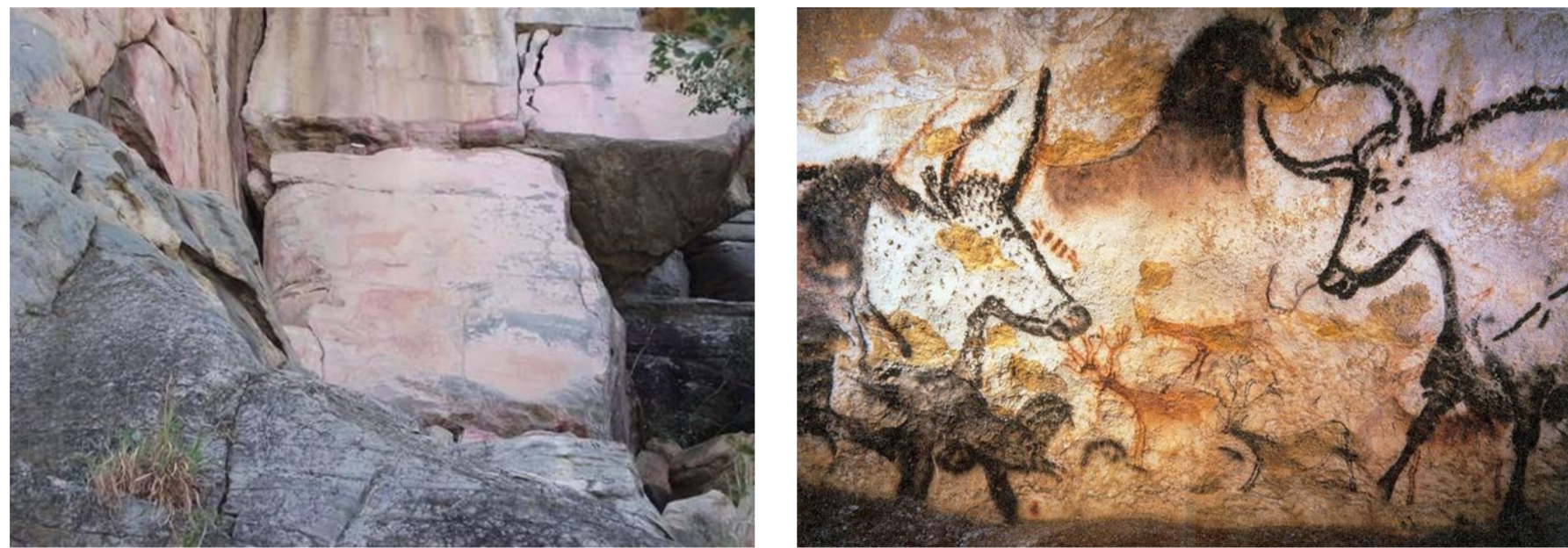


Fig 1: Rhino Cave, exemplifying of symbolic landscape (photo on the left by Joachim Huber, originally posted to Flickr as Tsodilo Hills, Botswana; photo on the right photograph of Lascaux animal painting posted to Flickr by Prof saxx)

INTRODUCTION

People from diverse backgrounds have different perception of sacredness. Indeed, it is the places, traditions, and activities of ordinary people that gives meaning to the spirit of a sacred site. The history of sacred landscape originates from Africa where people found their physical and spiritual energies by interacting with nature, hunting animals for food, and finding shelters to protect themselves from dangers. Inspired by the elements of nature in their surroundings, they also painted on cave walls and ceilings to communicate with others and demonstrate their traditions and ceremonial activities [1]. Painting and story-telling are two key elements in linking arts and sacredness together. Narratives of place, stories of certain areas, and historical anecdotes that refer to specific sites help passing along the rich mythical and experiential memories of the sacred places of the past to younger generations. In the case of Maya civilization, many of the cultural and spiritual values were demonstrated through paintings and rock arts [9]. Maya Mountains have approximately a dozen caves decorated by rock art, such as Robertos Cave and Actun Dzib in Belize. Their complex archaeological cultures show all diagnostic traits of highly diversified societies and cultural constructs.

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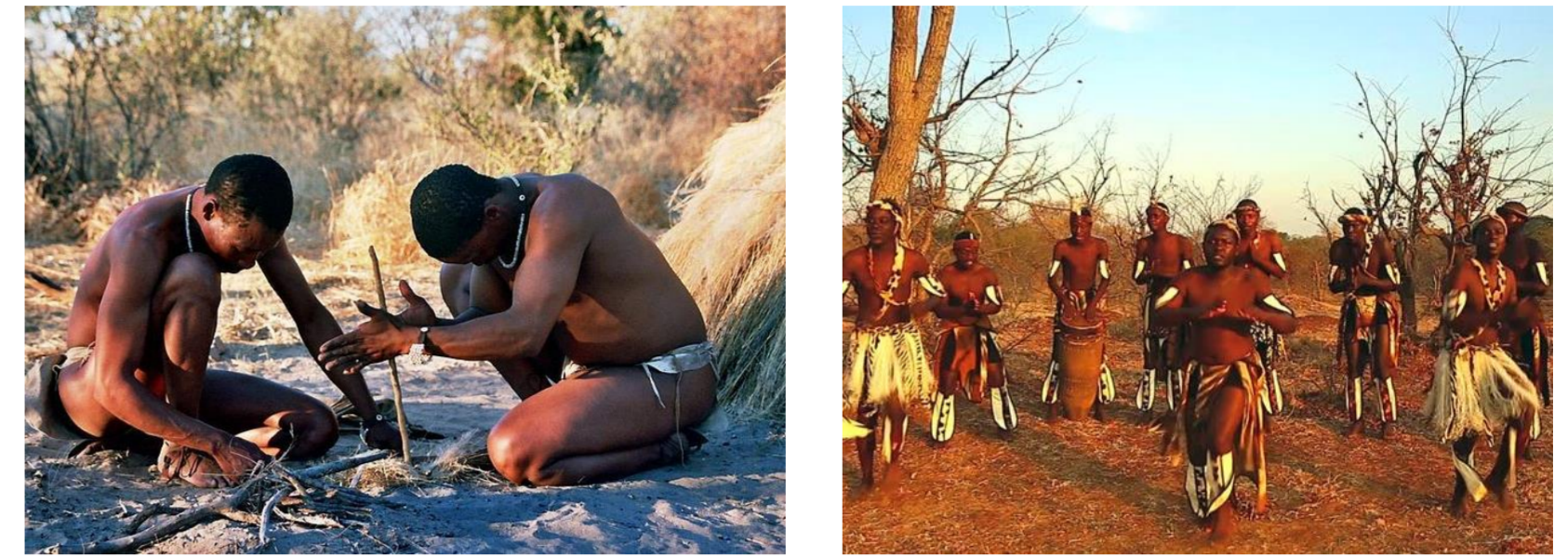


Fig 2: San Bushmen Tribe, exemplifying of dynamic Landscape (photo on the left by Ian Sewell originally posted to <http://www.ianandwendy.com>; photo on the right culture dance, exemplifying of cultural landscape by Carlton chirambwe posted on Wikimeia)

The benefits that such art works render can contribute to the spirit of a city where valued events of daily life and special occasions take place.

In this sense, the representation of a landscape is a result of our shared ideologies and belief systems that reflects our memories and myths. The degree to which these historic characteristics of sacred landscapes are present today, guides us in assessing and planning for reshaping modern cities.

As a city gradually develops, a sacred landscape can be incorporated into the urban design and planning of the city. It shapes and reshapes the character of the city over decades and centuries, expresses its altered heritage landscape, and defines its unique identity through a combined work of people, place, and time [6]. Perhaps one of the best examples can be found in the city of Rome during the Roman empire. The city was vibrant with ritual activities of every type, and of a wide range of temples and shrines for divine gods that occupied every corner of the city. As Paul Erdkamp (2014) points out in his book on ancient Rome, 'The modern reader – whose religious background, either by faith or socialization, may lie in one of the major monotheistic traditions, or who regards the conceptual and spatial separation of secular and sacred realms as a natural given – will find it hard to fathom, let alone reconstruct, the very sensation of witnessing the local polytheistic system of Rome at work.' With the existence of many religious micro-environments around the city, Roman sacred landscape really stands out as a unique example of a city that preserved its cultural and spiritual values while being constructed and reconstructed by its citizens.



Fig 3: Ancient Rome, exemplifying of ancient modern city (photo on the right by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, posted to Flickr as Détail de la maquette de Rome à l'époque de Constantin; photo on the left : Poverty Point ,1500BCE, exemplifying of sacred landscape posted on Wikipedia by Herb Roe)

SUMMARY

The aim of this work was to discuss the relevance of sacred landscapes in shaping modern urban areas. We discussed the several key components of sacred landscapes in generating tangible values for an urban landscape. We also found that people's traditions and heritage values, along with social interactions and community engagement, are the main ingredients in creating a unique spirit for a sacred landscape. We believe that maintaining urban continuity cannot be achieved with a superficial quick fix, but should be accommodated within a framework of respect and understanding that incorporates (rather than erases) the past to construct a new vision for the future. Urban planners and designers have a unique responsibility in acknowledging, protecting and enhancing spiritual places. This includes recognizing their absence and developing new spaces that can become the focal points for all people who live in modern urban areas.