

CRITICAL NOTE

Lifespans of Built Structures, Narrativity, and Conservation: A Critical Note

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A critical note on Peter Lamarque and Nigel Walter's 'The Application of Narrative to the Conservation of Historic Buildings' (*Estetika*, 1/2019).

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A distinguishing feature of buildings – herein, built structures – is that among artistic or aesthetic objects they can enjoy the longest lives, properly kept up. But what constitutes proper upkeep, and does that notion itself look the same for a given built structure across its lifespan? And if it doesn't stay the same, what thread can we follow to best ensure proper upkeep – that is, optimal conservation? Such questions are prompted by a picture of built structures as maintaining some sort of identity across time, where such identity may be sustained across varying stages, at least as nominally tied to different temporal periods, as attach to built structures and where some persistent features of each built structure contribute to sustaining its identity, inasmuch as possible, across spans of time. (Further, such identity may include multiple such stages conceivably extending from the moment they are built to the moment they are no more.) In addition, different sorts of features sustained across stages of the built structure's existence may contribute to sustaining different aspects of the structure's identity or, on another description, some other identity altogether. With this picture of diverse possibilities and trajectories, optimal conservation of built structures requires, or at least stands to benefit from, guidance that enables, across stages, some viable notion or representation of the built structure's long-term identity. Lamarque and Walter suggest,¹ with varying degrees of confidence, that we gain a valuable characterization and understanding of that long-term identity – and so guide conservation efforts well – through narrative accounts of built structures.

Here I assess Lamarque and Walter's suggestion and address three questions. First, I assess what the fundamental features of narratives for built structures should be. Specifically, I consider how we need to construct narratives of built structures as a function of how such structures persist through time, and I probe the nature of the narrator and their requisite features. Second, I identify the necessity and sufficiency of narrative accounts in guiding

¹ Peter Lamarque and Nigel Walter, 'The Application of Narrative to the Conservation of Historic Buildings', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 5–27.

conservation efforts. Third, I ask whether narrative is the right form to tell the story of a built structure. It's not clear we need *narrative* when a simpler way of describing the structure's *life* adequately characterizes its identity. I start, though, with the views of Walter and Lamarque, who both embrace narrative accounts, though not as equally enthused.

I. Walter's Enthusiasm

The central charge of architectural conservation, per Walter and Lamarque, is managing change in built structures, relative to their 'significance' and 'character', where significance comprises evidential, historical, aesthetic, or communal values.² Much rests on what might be meant by 'character' of built structures, either in Walter or elsewhere in conservation thinking, to best guide conservation practice. Walter, for his part, suggests that built structures have character in the manner of persons, or as other artifacts have 'character', derivatively understood. Moreover, he proposes, built structures live, develop, and grow (like living things), and in these ways they have, or perhaps even are, 'ongoing' narratives. Much as a person may have a persona that changes over time, as illuminated by a narrative account, so too built structures have a character or identity that, over time, changes such that its historical dimensions are better understood in terms of its narrative. Further, a narrative associated with a building endows it with some kind of meaning, as narratives do in the case of persons. These character-explaining and significance-revealing features mark narrative as useful to conservation analysis and decision-making.

In the landscape of thought on managing change in built structures, Walter sees his narrativity framework as succeeding where prior views have not. Thus, restoration, per Viollet-le-Duc, fails as sanitized, revisionist, and ultimately conjectural history; conservation, per Ruskin, Morris,³ and the SPAB tradition, promotes purely historical understanding and treatment of old built structures at the neglect of grasping their present use or possibilities; and postmodernist architectural theories too narrowly evaluate old built structures relative to present, instrumental or ideological ends. By contrast, Walter suggests, a narrative approach offers four advantageous factors, namely, that narrative is

- W1. *explanatorily robust*, accounting for temporal continuity of built structures;
- W2. *projective*, licensing future 'cultural production', as may include varied uses of a given structure over time;
- W3. *democratic and inclusive*, valuing community input beyond the specialist; and
- W4. *holistic*, telling the story of the whole, accretive, and developing built structure as a unified architectural object, and not just as reflective of its parts or aspects.

What makes narratives explanatorily robust marks them as fixing the respective failings of traditional conservationist and postmodernist approaches: narratives recount a past story of the built structure, account for the present chapter, and envision future chapters. In this way, Walter's narrativity view works from the assumption that to have a theory of change

² Ibid., 5. Conservation is taken to possibly involve greater intervention than architectural preservation, the goal of which is to keep built structures in their present condition while doing as little as might have an impact on the structure. See John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 8, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903); William Morris and Philip Webb, 'Manifesto for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings' (1877), in Bernard Feilden, *Conservation of Historic Buildings*, 3rd ed. (1982; Oxford: Architectural Press, 2003), 359–60, <https://www.spab.org.uk/about-us/spab-manifesto>. A yet earlier conception – architectural restoration – has it that we may bring older, decrepit built structures back to their intended, original states, or at least states that are historically more authentic.

³ Ruskin, *Seven Lamps*; Morris and Webb, 'Manifesto'.

management, we need to be able to account for change. Indeed, Walter has it that all buildings are subject to change, as is necessary for their ‘health’ – by which he appears to mean at least their ongoing integrity, though also their ongoing and purposeful integration in the built landscape and amidst other social infrastructure. Taking built structures as objects that must grow and develop to remain useful in these or other ways, Walter holds that any account of their identity as ongoing entities must explain their growth trajectories, past, present, and future. That is to tell a story that weaves together all the moments of change and explains them as one explains history – whether by pattern or anomaly – in narrative terms. In his narrative conception of built structures, change is understood as presenting a normal and manageable range of problems, which fit into a developing, unfinished story.

II. Lamarque’s Concessionary Stance

Lamarque, for his part, is a bit less sanguine about prospects for a narrative account⁴ but in the end acknowledges some merit in such an approach to conservation. In particular, a narrative model is attractive because, following Walter’s projectivity thesis (W2), such a model provides accounts of buildings that yield conservation choices rooted in the past though not (as Lamarque worries about historical narratives generally) bound by the past. Here, Lamarque sees a connection with Walter’s inclusivity argument (W3). Narrative accounts of the temporal span of built structures permit a multiplicity of perspectives as to the structure’s ‘right’ story, relative to either next or past ‘chapters’. The fact that we may not be able to identify a single, best, or correct narrative is a point in favor of narrative accounts, not against them. On democratic grounds, we want to allow for as many perspectives as possible on current understandings of the built structure’s past and possible futures. Further, narrative accounts best other sorts of accounts of temporal spans of built structures in offering maximum ideological flexibility in conservation. A next chapter of a built structure’s story can take many different turns; by contrast, in a traditional preservationist account, dogmatic guidelines tell us what the next chapter will look like, namely, as much like the prior chapters as possible. Finally, Lamarque endorses something like Walter’s holism thesis (W4): What narrative accounts offer over other sorts of historical accounts is a sense of coherence and unity among historical events or ‘chapters’ in the temporal span of the built structure.

There are some worries here on Lamarque’s part. For one, narrative accounts are useful as a guide to conservation thinking if they help in making decisions, for example, by introducing constraints on conservation choices. But as Walter allows, that’s not a feature of narrative accounts. So that is a deficit in Lamarque’s estimation. And yet, Walter proposes, taking conservation debates as contestations among narratives is still an advance over simple appeal to traditional, rigid principles of conservation. Lamarque concedes that this makes narrative accounts useful as heuristics. For another, narratives can be askew or unreliable, yielding distortions of identity, and there may not be any check on this. Then any conservation decisions that depend on an accurate sense of the built structure’s identity are at risk. That said, Lamarque notes, such dangers to accuracy or integrity can arise in other sorts of conservation guidelines as appeal not to narrative accounts but to standard or traditional principles or values of conservation. So narrative is at least no worse than the alternatives.

All this speaks to the instrumental attraction of narrative accounts in their plausible explanatory value and socio-cultural utility. That said, the issue of greater note for Lamarque, in light

⁴ Indeed, his initial thought is that his earlier critique of narrative, as putative accounts of personal identity or sense of self, is broadly generalizable, such that we should be worried, too, about a narrative account of the temporal span of architectural objects.

of his concerns about narrative in other domains, is what makes narratives viable to begin with as attached to, or best characterizing, the identity of built structures. In short, are built structures the sorts of things that truly have, or can be assigned, narratives? Here he notes, along with Walter, that we can distinguish a building with a continuous and long-standing existence from a building that no longer exists as intact; further, this distinction suggests that the former building is midstream in a temporal sequence that we can call an ongoing story or account for in an ongoing story.⁵ The latter building, by contrast, has gotten to the end of such a sequence, or the end of its story. This much suggests that built structures, in virtue of their lasting over long periods of time, indeed can be described in narrative terms.

Lamarque remains concerned, however, about two points in this regard. First, built structures might be the subject of narratives but they cannot be narratives *per se*, at least in the sense traditionally associated with narrative self-report. This is because every narrative requires that a person, rather than an object, relate that narrative. To avoid anthropomorphizing, any viable notion of narrative accounts of built structures should take the structures to be the subjects, with their narratives told by people. Second, as narrative accounts are incomplete and non-comprehensive, they should not have disproportionate significance in our explanations, understandings, or decisions. This goes for built structures as for persons.

This last concern speaks to a more general problem Lamarque entertains before moving to his concessionary stance. One motivation Walter presents for a narrative model is that buildings, like living things, are brought into being, enjoy a potentially long-lasting existence, and then meet their demise; consequently, buildings may be described in the same narrative terms as we describe lives. In response, Lamarque offers that the lives buildings lead are not the same as narratives. In general, the nature of narrative – being partial accounts of a life, external to the life, and not necessarily accurate in detailing the life – is not fitting to the notion of the identity of some x across the lifespan of x ; nor do identities tend to rely on any particular narrative.⁶ Indeed, Lamarque suggests, that built structures sustain their identity across time seems more a function of the same structural elements that endure than a consequence of any attendant narratives or their elements, which tend to shift and may be variable at any given point in time.

Two points appear to prompt Lamarque to move beyond this problem and adopt his concessionary stance. For one, the instrumental case: narratives such as Walter's account entails may help guide conservation of built structures. For another, the ongoing story case: to say that built structures have accompanying narratives, it is sufficient for us to point to the temporal sequences in which those structures are created, exist at various stages, and then fall apart or are destroyed – and to be able to locate the built structures at one or another of those stages as playing a particular role in an ongoing story. In embracing the ongoing story case, Lamarque is apparently jettisoning his requirement for built structures to have narratives, that such narratives preserve a given structure's identity. This is the heart of his concession to Walter's position, namely, that built structures may have narratives because, far from demanding that they be identity-preserving, we want narratives that tell us multiple different histories of structures and so help to frame their multiple possible future identities. Within bounds set by the limits of their incomplete and perspectival character, we can draw on narrative accounts that provide flexible and diverse guidance in conserving built structures.

⁵ Some piece of calling this account a story leans on a metaphorical understanding of the building as a living thing, presumably because temporal sequences of living things seem more amenable to story-like accounts than those of nonliving things, like rocks.

⁶ Except in the case of personas as identities, but it is questionable that personas lead actual lives.

III. Appraising the Narrativity View

A number of assumptions throughout the Walter-Lamarque dialogue merit assessment. These include the notion that narratives for built structures offer an obvious, inconsequential sense of who designs and delivers such historical accounts, or of the ways that built structures persist across time; that the utility case points to ways that narrative accounts suffice for or are necessary to guiding conservation of historic built structures; and that historical stories about built structures optimally should be in narrative form after all. I examine each of these in turn.

Metaphysical Concerns. Taking narratives as viable historical accounts of built structures prompts a number of questions about the underlying metaphysics. For one, there is the matter of characterizing those qualities that a narrator must have. For another, there is the matter of specifying the sorts of things that built structures must be, relative to their persisting across time – as endurants or perdurants – and gauging consequences for the sort of narratives available on either view.

In framing the histories of built structures as narratives, the question arises as to who is reporting or crafting the narrative. Indeed, as in film or literature, we may ask whether, for a given built structure, there *is* a narrator, and if so, what their characteristic or requisite features must be. As to the first question: In architecture, typically two parties contend to provide narratives for built structures – architects, as creators, and architectural historians, as guides to the cultural past (in more recent times, developers, as marketers, have joined that list).⁷ Walter and Lamarque discuss another possibility, that of varying communities of stakeholders as narrators. This proposal offers the promise of promoting greater democracy in conservation projects, as different stakeholders tender their distinctive versions or interpretations of a fitting narrative. Lamarque sees potential difficulty in perspectival differences, though one could imagine efforts to reconcile correspondingly differing narratives. Other problems are less simple to resolve. For one, stakeholders by the nature of their position and bearing vested interest thwart the very possibility of narrative objectivity to which historians aspire. Accordingly, they bring to their narratives higher risk of cherry-picked historical data, just-so stories, or just plain inaccuracy. For another, stakeholders' narratives of a built structure are crafted at particular instants along the structure's timeline, each instant in turn being interest-laden. (Note, for example, the varying narratives offered by a community when a building is built in the style of its day, and much later, when popular contempt for that original style prevails.) Each of these factors make more likely that stakeholders' narratives exploit history than do history proper. Walter's response to worries about resulting differences among narratives is to point to a premium on inclusion. The problem, however, is less about perspectival overabundance *per se* and more to do with maintaining ambitions towards objectivity or at least non-relativistic verisimilitude.

As to the second question – whether there must be a narrator – as I note below, there may be historical accounts of built structures for which such are not required, though in the cases I describe we are not entertaining narratives *stricto sensu*. Supposing that there *is* a narrator, we may ask what minimal requirements they must meet. For example, must narrators be present at the moment the creation 'starts' (is built), the way narrators are often present at the start of a novel? Or can narrators be introduced at a later point, including mid-narrative? As their perspectives will vary according to their point of introduction, this seems a basic parameter to specify, yet it is not clear how to do so. A further puzzle about the nature of

⁷ Architectural historians may tell all manner of narratives relative to the same built structure; see, for example, Nicola Camerlenghi, 'The Longue Durée and the Life of Buildings', in *New Approaches to Medieval Architecture*, ed. Robert Bork, William W. Clark, and Abby McGehee (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 11–21, and Dana Arnold, *Reading Architectural History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002).

the narrator results from the stakeholder stipulation. On Walter's view, to tender a narrative of significance or value to conservation efforts, one has to be invested in the fate of a built structure – culturally, utility-wise, financially, or otherwise. This raises the question of how to judge the outer limit of significant, or relevant, investment beyond which point one may not be considered an appropriate narrator. This issue is well-known in the annals of heritage conservationism – with which architectural conservationism has significant overlap – and is of particular sensitivity in instances where conservation efforts are mounted at a transnational distance or by international organizations.⁸

Talk about narrative of built structures as a similar kind to narrative of persons is an invitation, via conditions for personal identity, to see built structure narratives through the lens of the metaphysics of persistence. Thus, narrative accounts assume that the built structures so described (or, on Walter's strong sense, so existing *qua* narrative) persist through time. This is a broadly fair assumption in light of two key features of built structures: in many (though not all) cultural traditions they are built to persist over time, and in many (though not the majority of) instances, built structures can persist for a very long time. But *how* do they persist over time?

If (a) by enduring, then built structures are entirely present across their historical trajectories, give or take additions and subtractions, repairs, or ruination.

If (b) by perduring, then built structures have temporal parts and are not present in their physical entireties across their historical trajectories.⁹

Indeed, if built structures perdure, it is hard to see that they can be read *as* narratives (strong sense) or be read *through* narratives (weak sense), at least where narratives are traditionally conceived as identity-preserving historical accounts. In the perdurantist picture, built structures are space-time worms, where historical accounts may locate different physical features (or their uses, states of repair, etc.) as particular to one or more in a series of temporal parts. The historical or narrative task is then to say how, and under what conditions, some perdurant built structure B persists, for example, from t_0 to t_1 . But persistence here happens because B has two temporal parts B_0, B_1 , and that's not because B has an identity equal to B_0 or B_1 – nor is it true that they *are* identical. Thus, given perdurantism, historical accounts do not look useful for identity preservation; rather, such accounts rely on the supposition or establishment of B as the worm comprising $\{B_0, \dots, B_n\}$.¹⁰ So while backwards-looking historical accounts can tell us about prior temporal parts of a structure that the worm strings together, such accounts identify only part of a unified subject (from prior temporal parts) and, consequently, are at best incomplete narratives. Not being grounded in a complete identity, such accounts cannot deliver on Walter's hope that narrative give voice to a holistic identity and so guide conservation efforts.

Utility Arguments for Narrative. Such issues are of note, naturally, only if narrative accounts are how we want to tell the story of built structures – and the primary motivation for Lamarque and Walter is the instrumental value of such accounts, that narratives of historic

⁸ See Lynn Meskell and Christoph Brumann, 'UNESCO and New World Orders', in *Global Heritage: A Reader*, ed. Lynn Meskell (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 22–42; Morag M. Kersel and Christina Luke, 'Civil Societies? Heritage Diplomacy and Neo-Imperialism', in Meskell, *Global Heritage*, 70–93.

⁹ Otherwise put: on an endurantist reading, a built structure persists through time IFF across the built structure's timeline, it exists in its entirety at each point on the timeline. And on a perdurantist reading, a built structure persists through time IFF across the built structure's timeline, each of its distinct temporal parts exist at some point on the timeline.

¹⁰ On a Stage Theory variant of Four-Dimensionalism, built structures don't persist at all, but rather represent temporally-indexed counterpart entities – for which a very different sort of historical account might be possible, though not likely narrative in character.

buildings guide conservation in useful ways. This appears not to be the case, however, as it neither suffices nor is necessary to appeal to such narratives to provide proper or optimal guidelines for conservation.

The sufficiency reasoning goes like this: in appreciating the historical pathway that a built structure has traveled to date, we gain guidance for conservation efforts, which guidance will represent, and project possible futures ahead from, views of the past. Narrative presents the developmental arc of a structure, through the succession of its stages, and that arc shapes a sense of direction for the stages going forward as include conserving the structure. But the mere gathering of perspectives on the past, and identifying the historical trajectory such as they describe, does not provide such guidance. In particular, to guide conservation we still need projection principles that tell us which of the many ways we should follow, and why, from a given prior trajectory of structural change, use, cultural engagement, or other historical factors. This is as true of narrative, with its robust communication of heritage and character, as with other historical forms; knowing how the past is perceived and read as part of one's community in the present moment may not by itself provide a guide to what about a built structure should be kept intact going forward. Consider the case of *façadism*, in which the frontage of an old building is buffed to a high sheen while the entire rest of the structure is taken down and replaced by a new building, typically of far grander scale and generally of no stylistic relation, be it complementary or otherwise in dialogue.¹¹ One may debate the degree of authenticity produced by such conservation efforts, but the problem for the sufficiency of narrative here is starker: no narratives alone would point in the direction taking this particular approach to conservation; nor is it clear that narratives would suffice to argue against such an approach, either. Grander principles come into play.

The necessity of narrative is of greater interest to Walter, who argues that narratives incorporate community voices and draw on the varying perspectives of experts and non-experts, and as a matter of social and political rectitude, conservation efforts cannot legitimately ignore this fullest range of judgments and sentiments. Further, he proposes, we need narratives to locate architectural objects relative to the past and the future; this is in contrast with traditional conservation perspectives that only look to the past. Lamarque agrees on both counts. In this last regard, however, we could just stipulate addition of a future orientation in our conservation principles without leaning on 'narrativity'. So we don't need narrative to attain this goal. The first point is harder to resist given a premium on democracy and inclusion in public choice. Yet two qualifications are in order. One, we might not need historical accounts of built structures to grasp a community or stakeholder perspective on conservation stakes and choices; purely contemporary concerns might suffice. Two, assuming we do need historical accounts, it's not clear we need to rely on narratives *per se*.

Narratives and Other Historical Forms. To give an account of historical pathways of a built structure, we need to make sure we pick the right or best story form – of which narrative is only one option. Standard alternative story forms include annals and chronicles. One question here is whether narrative is best in this case, and to get at the answer requires understanding the nature of historical stories told about built structures. A central feature of such stories – highlighted by Walter – is that they focus on details of the life of the structure. A further question, then, is whether narratives *per se* are needed – or optimal – for outlining such a life. Another feature of such stories – per Walter and Lamarque, though in different ways – is that they are identity-preserving. Representation of a structure's lifespan may be sufficient for indicating that structure's identity – not only in the manifold, stakeholder-driven fashion

¹¹ See Thomas L. Schumacher, "Façadism" Returns, or the Advent of the "Duck-orated Shed", *Journal of Architectural Education* 63 (2010): 128–37, doi: 10.1111/j.1531-314x.2010.01073.x.

that Walter ascribes to narratives but also in a way that corresponds to a singular, physical, and cultural history of the structure.

To begin with, the stories of built structures as offer the best historical accounts might turn out not to be narratives. Consider three sorts of historical accounts, as delineated in the Carroll-White story-form taxonomy. As Noël Carroll suggests, following Morton White,¹² story forms are discourses with some temporal ordering and include at least these types:

1. *Annals*, or an ordered series of events as may lack a unified subject;
2. *Chronicles*, or an ordered series of events as features a unified subject; and
3. *Narratives*, or an ordered series of events as features a unified subject and suggests causal connections (of a viable sort¹³) among the events.

Indeed, in Carroll's account, the very mark of narrative is that the subject is unified *by* the causal relations.¹⁴ Thus he sees narrative not simply as a story form but also as an *explanatory* form: narratives explain courses of events and significant background conditions in virtue of their following and reporting on causal connections. While the Carroll-White taxonomy focuses on stories in written or cinematic contexts, Feagin notes that a broader sense of story is available, where causation – hence narrative accounts – need not be human-driven or purposive at all.¹⁵

Where do historical accounts of built structures fit in here? For their part, Walter and Lamarque think such accounts should tell a story about previous stages of the structure's existence, including, but not limited to, initial design phase, such that what comes next – in conservation but conceivably otherwise, for example, in re-use – is coherent and consistent with that story. Further, multiple perspectives on the structure's past or future are possible, each shaped by varying views of past events, use, intentions, community or other stakeholder interests, and so on. Note that such accounts fully commit to an ordered series of events, and there is the assumption of a unified subject. However, what's missing here, as would satisfy the Carroll-White notion of narrative, is any causal or explanatory character, except in the attenuated sense that the prior structural conditions provide the physical background conditions for any present or future structure to continue to exist. To take Walter's example, it's not as if the Church of St Nicholas as constituted in medieval times *causes* that same church to have certain other, modified features in Victorian times. We don't find here the sort of causal or explanatory character of narrative that Carroll requires.

That said, and looking at the next candidate form in the Carroll-White taxonomy, the Walter-Lamarque sense of historical account is not quite limited to what chronicles entail: a simple series of events with a unified subject. To see why, consider the construct of a unified subject in terms of Walter's sense of the life of a built structure. Such a life has a bookended, up-and-down trajectory, from design and construction through modification, re-use, and conservation, through decline, ruin, and destruction – this much fits the minimal sense of unified subject that make for chronicles. However, the histories of built structures on Walter's reckoning also feature those structures as characters, not in the sense of personality

¹² Noël Carroll, 'On the Narrative Connection', in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 118–33; Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

¹³ The events taken as causes must be, on Carroll's reckoning, causally relevant and at least causally necessary to the events taken as effects.

¹⁴ '[...] causal relations are standardly the cement that unifies the subject of the story.' Carroll, 'On the Narrative Connection', 127.

¹⁵ Susan L. Feagin, 'On Noël Carroll on Narrative Closure', *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 17–25.

or temperament, but in terms of playing a role in a cultural or social environment. In Walter's example, the church plays a role in religious and community contexts, and possibly in other contexts, depending on re-purposing. What might be seen as an account of owner or occupant use or intention, adjunct to the core physical or aesthetic history of the structure, is for Walter woven into the story of the structure's life trajectory. This picture of things takes us beyond the built structure as mere unified subject and indeed introduces causation and explanation to the story. However, we don't quite arrive back at narrative, at least in the Carroll-White taxonomy, because it's not the structure that has agency or purpose here but rather the people involved with the structure. If it's a narrative by that taxonomy, it's a narrative of the structure and its various engaged communities over time.

This might give us a suitable framework for historical accounts of built structures as narratives, either for guiding conservation or more broadly. But there is another way to think of such accounts as highlights the lives of structures. This other approach does not necessitate bringing other, agentive characters into the picture – and also may help avoid the tripwire of needing to fit the stories' features into a formal narrative arc of a regular pattern. This other way to tell histories in this domain is the lifecycle concept, which we find in construction, maintenance, and environmental practice and scholarship related to built structures. According to the lifecycle concept, built structures have lives that may follow stages in the way that Walter notes, and they are described as systems with parts, dimensions, and dynamics. Thus, lifecycle considerations in the management of built structures typically comprise the regulatory, especially as concerns environmental performance, including energy conservation; maintainability, including cost and risk; aesthetic, as relative to context or in some absolute sense; and trade-offs – all of which may be broadly economic in scope.¹⁶ As this list of considerations suggests, historical accounts on the lifecycle model feature causation and explanation and so move beyond mere unified subjects. On the other hand, such accounts are focused on history of the system of the structure *per se* – rather than history of the greater system of structure plus builder, user, tenant, or community. Lifecycle histories, unlike their attendant social, cultural, or environmental histories, don't give us narrative-style accounts of goal-directed change over time (except incidentally and at punctuating moments) or of motives as attach to the agents operating on or within the built structure's system. Nor do lifecycle histories fit fixed patterns beyond the loosest construal of generation and corruption. What they do give us, however, is a history of a built structure as may be said, metaphorically, to live; and of the sorts of considerations that tie the structure together over time as a unified subject.

This cohesion as a persistent and single life is a major feature of historical accounts of built structures for Walter and Lamarque because having such a history is what provides guidance for future states of the structure. What comes next for the structure, in short, should in some way continue the tradition of what came before in the structure – which dictum assumes there is a discernable pattern to the prior history, as characterizes the unified subject. This is why historical accounts have to be identity-preserving in at least some regard, even as built structures have a mutable identity. As Walter and many other conservationists note, sustained identity does not require perfect stasis, and some degree and kinds of change in built structures may facilitate overall persistence. Indeed, change may represent growth in developmental terms we associate with people and their capacities. As an example, a structure built as a factory exhibits development if repurposed as an apartment building, where the basic design as conserved thereby 'grows' further capacity to function in ways wholly other than those for which it initially was designed. At all events, we don't need narrative histories

¹⁶ See, for example, Kathrina Simonen, *Life Cycle Assessment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

of built structures to account for series of instances in which structures changed and grew or to account for their preserving identity throughout. We simply need to be able to project ahead from historical accounts featuring a unified subject to ranges of possible ways in which the structures can change yet somehow remain the same. And to meet Walter's inclusivity standard, we want to be able to reflect various stakeholder views on those histories or ranges of possible futures. To these ends, we might well want to know prior agents' choices or motivations, or that the history meets a pattern, or where our present choices are located in any such pattern. But we don't need to know such things as a function of knowing the history of the built structure. Stakeholders' perspectives of narrative arc or agents' motives and choices may well obscure a built structure's true through lines or connecting historical themes – be they structural, aesthetic, use-oriented, cultural, or otherwise – for which it suffices to highlight the history of its lifecycle stages and corresponding system dynamics. To help preserve a structure's mutually agreeable and historically coherent identity, then, its past is best represented by a thinner, rather than thicker, life story. This should likely be a recipe for more inclusive conservationism, too.

IV. Conclusion

Narrative accounts can be a valuable framework for understanding and better conserving buildings where, apart from any role such accounts may play in identity preservation, they successfully communicate community or stakeholder perspectives. While narrative accounts are not necessary to such communications, they represent a brand of historical representation that is, per tradition, significant to conservation thinking. Moreover, we need narrative accounts to capture any history of built structures that features causally relevant sequences of events in which those structures play a role. This much in the Lamarque and Walter picture is correct. Yet there is both more and less to the story. The more: To say what narrative contributes to understanding built structures requires greater specification of related fundamental matters as include, but are not limited to, the nature of the narrator and of built structures' persistence across time. Among other such matters to specify are whether there are master-narratives that offer a template or rubric for classes of built structures (and what features of such master-narratives would be) and what grounds the normative nature of narratives of built structures (that is, what sorts of values or principles). The less: Notwithstanding the importance of stakeholder inclusivity, conservation of built structures doesn't rest solely on narrative accounts so informed, if it rests on them at all. The course of conservation cannot be determined without central considerations of technical, social, and architectural-historical reasons or factors.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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