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Critical Response 3 – Symbolic Messages in Landscape, Architecture, and Material Remains

This week’s readings offer thoughts and case studies on “above-ground archaeology,” or garnering information through architectural remains and associated landscapes of historic houses. The importance of historic house legends or “American mythology” is also addressed in the readings for this week, demonstrating how family legends can reveal important social values of past individuals (Yentsch 1988: 5). A focus on the symbolic spaces that are inherently tied to the structures, landscapes, and legends of historic houses is extremely beneficial to reconstructing the past, specifically with our work at the John Brown House. Examining *all* that has been left at the JBH – excavated material remains, architectural structures, overall landscape layout, and resounding legends about the property or family – will help identify the “deep mental structures people used to comprehend the world around them” (King 2006: 300). It is important to understand both how people viewed their world *and* how we interpret their views today.

With specific regard to architectural features of historic homes, Yentsch writes “while the remains of houses below ground consist of archaeological features or artifacts, standing ones are architectural entities that remain functional elements of a world-in-action” (Yentsch 1988: 16). A house’s physical remains presents the structure as it was seen by the individuals who once called the place their home, whose own personal beliefs and choices shaped its very layout and design. In this way, “houses serve as historical records set in the landscape” (Yentsch 1988: 6). Examining, for example, the layouts of colonial Chesapeake houses, King explains that in archaeological investigations of contemporary historic houses, the differences between upper and lower class homes extend beyond the expected physical ones and can represent, additionally, specific symbolic spaces (2006: 293-305). For the wealthy Chesapeake homeowners, pirates posed the greatest threats; architectural features both of a home itself and the property (the construction of a magazine adjacent to the home) reflect these personal decisions and beliefs (King 2006: 293). For the lower-class farmers’ homes, specific design actions were undertaken in the layout of the home to protect against witchcraft, again reflecting what have been interpreted today as the personal beliefs of the home’s residents (King 2006: 294).

Further importance of property layouts is described in Mrozowski, where archaeologists express different interpretations of the Tate family property. The family’s use of all “available yard space for a variety of economic purposes” is indicative of financial necessity typical of the Tate’s proposed economic class, yet ceramic material remains that were excavated are those of a comparatively higher economic class (Mrozowski 2006: 57). The discrepancy in the findings is important to the investigation as it promotes further questions and research; researchers, however, must be careful even labeling it a “discrepancy.” What might be considered an inconsistency in economic class now might have been a legitimate, unnoticed part of the Tate’s 18th century worldview.

A final example of associated landscapes and property layout is seen in Leone’s case study of gardens in pre-Revolutionary America. Leone argues that the development of the landscape into gardens represented the colonists’ changing views of society (representing a developing social order) (1988: 255). Gardens were tangible signs of wealth (Leone 1988: 256). Again, the physical remains embedded on the landscape tell a story, in this case one that most colonists with gardens would have wanted – that their property *was* wealthy, ordered, and controlled. However, upon looking closer at the material remains and records of the times, it appears that not all garden-holders were of the same “wealth class” – some had “old money,” while others were of the *nouveau-riche*, important distinctions in colonial society (Leone 1988: 256). For researchers, the impressions given off by these landscapes often mask the nuanced realities of the sites, just as they were probably intended to do for observers in the past.

Considering now the architecture and landscape of the John Brown House, historical archaeologists have an entire, restored structure with which to work. The positioning and location of the house itself reveals John Brown’s business interests; situated on a hill, overlooking all of Providence, it was the perfect location for an overseas trader to keep watch for incoming ships in the 18th century. Today, visitors to the museum are met with a different view and yard, seemingly anachronistic when compared to the restored interior. The house museum recreates what the home might have looked like in the late 18th century, based off detailed archival records and objects dating directly from the time. The home is filled with foreign pieces and expensive items, representing today John Brown’s cosmopolitan nature and wealth, just as they probably did for 18th century visitors. In addition to the material culture, a strong archival collection means that much of the early lineage of the home is accounted for. Specifically, fire and insurance maps, documenting architectural changes in the layout of the landscape, are available. From these maps, historians have traced the construction on the house that eventually led to the massive structure seen today. In the house, one notices differences between the original 18th century structure and the early 20th century addition. From the adjoining rooms, crafted to accommodate large parties of 18th century guests, to the ornate bathroom of the Gilded Age, the house is full of physical “world-in-action” symbolic messages of people’s life choices and goals, or, perhaps, what the curators have decided to highlight as people’s choices and goals.

Researchers at the John Brown House, though, must be careful that modern-day assumptions and judgments do not cloud interpretation. Modern “folk explanations” associated with historic homes often offer racially and ethnically superior justification for past events (Yentsch 1988: 11). These “folk explanations” are particularly evident in the JBH slave tunnel myths. While historical and archaeological evidence rebut them, the tales continue, and their mere association with the house may actually be important in analyzing the property and its history. Historic houses and their “associated family stories [can] become a mechanism for social cohesion” (Yentsch 1988: 16). John Brown was indeed a documented slave trader, so it makes sense that his profession would be the basis of the myths. Myth-supporters project their modern-day views of John Brown and slavery literally onto the landscape – views that slavery is immoral, illicit, and would have to have been carried out in secret methods, i.e. through underground slave tunnels. “Physical objects situated [or, in this case, ‘imagined’] in the landscape call to mind the oral traditions of a people,” and such traditions, in turn, highlight important biases in the interpretations of sites (Yentsch 1988: 5). In brief comparison, consideration of the Hale-Ives House, present in building records but absent in the landscape, is rarely addressed (outside of academia) in discussions of the JBH lawn. Its construction and demolition are seemingly unimportant because none of the house remains part of a “world-in-action.” The importance of the house remains *is* high from an archaeological standpoint, as excavation of foundations could yield great knowledge of 19th century culture, yet the pervasive interest in the lawn still surrounds the slave tunnels – mythical, but still apparently a greater link to the past than actual, buried house remains.

“Social and cultural change begins with the choices, decisions, and actions of individuals,” and having the luxury of being able to track individuals throughout the history of the John Brown House surely aids in identifying and understanding those cultural changes (King 2006: 299). Similarly, “people express their lives in the things surrounding them,” and, perhaps inadvertently, construct “material identity” in their homes to represent what they believe and how they live (Leone 1988: 237; Mrozowski 2006: 37). The John Brown House is rich with material remains, evident in the restored 18th century interior; the house museum is curated with care to demonstrate what historians theorize as the JHB residents’ decorative and therefore life preferences. With the structural remains and landscape layouts directly before our eyes, therefore, real archaeological work comes in carefully separating opinions and realities of the past from our own 21st century biases and nuanced historical notions.

Works Cited

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