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Lay people's evaluation of historic sites

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Abstract

In The Netherlands, assessing the value of historic buildings and determining municipal preservation policy is done by experts in historical architecture. Protests from residents against this policy are becoming more frequent, however and insight into their criteria for evaluating historicity is required so that their values may be taken into account in planning procedures. In a pilot study in the south of The Netherlands, in-depth interviews were held among two groups of inhabitants, residents living in the study area and nonresidents living in adjacent regions. Four criteria determined their evaluation of historic buildings: form, function, knowledge and familiarity. For preservation, the study found that lay people's evaluations could be expressed in two rules: at the level of the building function must follow form and at the level of the surroundings strategy must follow structure. A comparison was made between the evaluation criteria used by experts in historical architecture and by residents or lay people. A difference is that lay people's evaluations are mainly based on form while the main criterion for experts is knowledge, or information value. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In The Netherlands, there is a growing tendency to take lay people's opinions into account when making plans for historic environments. This is partly based on a decentralization tendency in Dutch planning processes, but also on a growing resistance from inhabitants against what they consider as official arbitrariness. More and more, planning is based not only on expert opinions but on the opinion of lay people, such as inhabitants and user groups as well.

Is historic value a quality for most people? In research on environmental assessment, arguments for the existence of basic qualities in human perception

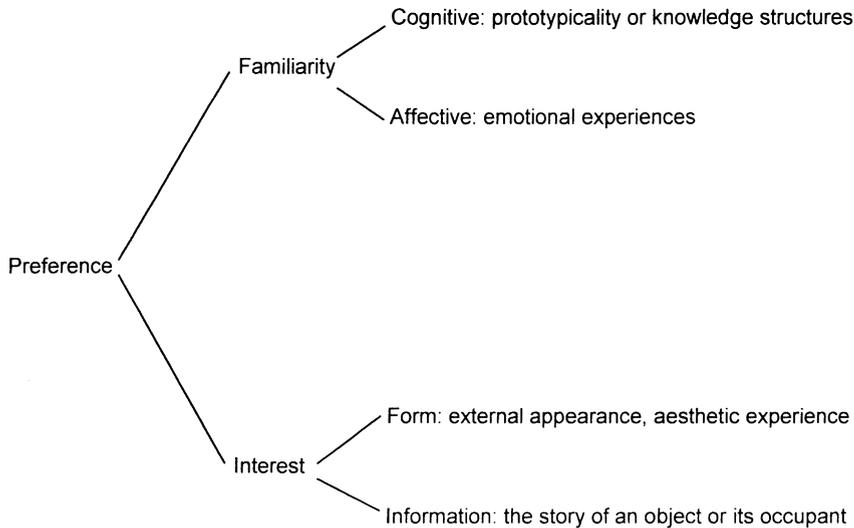
and evaluation have been propounded both in psychology (Koch, 1969) and in architecture (Alexander, 1979) and authors like Lynch (1972), Lowenthal (1985) and Schama (1995) have stressed the importance of historic values for human well-being, be it mainly from a philosophical and not an experimental point of view. In previous research, historic value is either identified directly or indirectly as an important environmental quality for people. Indirectly, it may play a role in Kaplan and Wendt's well-known four basic environmental attributes: coherence, identifiability or legibility, complexity and mystery (Kaplan and Wendt, 1972; a later model by Kaplan and Kaplan (1982) gives a different structure, but the attributes remain the same). Directly, historic value is one of the eight fundamental qualities in environmental perception identified in Dutch research (Coeterier, 1996).

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Table 1

The components of environmental preference



As a starting point, however, a model by Purcell and Nasar (1992) is used (Table 1) because of three reasons: (a) it is internationally recognized; (b) it contains both cognitive and affective aspects, whereas the model by Kaplan and Wendt is mainly cognitive and (c) because the role of their components is supported by other literature on environmental appreciation.

1.1. Cognitive

Photographs of landscapes and townscapes were presented to a group of people and judged on aesthetic preference (Purcell and Nasar, 1992). Small differences between a scene and existing knowledge structures (prototypicality) produced liking; somewhat larger differences produced interest, which generally enhanced liking too. With still larger differences, interest may persist but liking diminished. With very large differences, disliking occurred. However, some controversy remains. According to Boselie (1991), prototypicality does not play a role in aesthetics, while Hekkert (1995) found a linear relationship between prototypicality of figurative stimuli and beauty ratings.

1.2. Affective

Although, affect means feeling, a term like the emotional value of an environment is mostly avoided,

probably because of its strong subjective connotations. Instead, terms like value (Schwartz, 1992) or valence (Feather, 1995) are used. In a large project, covering 20 countries, Schwartz identified “10 motivationally distinct value types that are used to form value priorities”. One of those value types is ‘tradition’.

1.3. Form

Groat (1988) found a high level of consistency in the evaluation of contextual compatibility which, according to Bourassa (1991), plays an important role in people’s aesthetic evaluation of objects and environments. Contextual fit was also a topic in our research and a high level of consistency would justify the use of small groups of respondents. The more so, because “Aesthetic perception is not a special kind of perception, something that must be learned” (Haanstra, 1994).

1.4. Information

Probably, there is a relationship between information and prototypicality. On the one hand, new information about a class of objects, e.g. castles, may lead to a differentiation of existing prototypes and the formation of new ones (Rosch, 1975; Gaver and Mandler, 1987). On the other hand, information about

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