

## POINT: Reconstruction Doesn't Work!

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A FALSE SENSE OF HISTORY will be created if the San Agustín Mission is reconstructed. The result would convey more about the values of today's "hyper-realistic" culture than it ever could of the nineteenth-century culture the original building represented. Nothing remains of this building. Furthermore, it has lost its contextual relationship to the other built features and open spaces of Mission San Agustín, the flowing Santa Cruz River that supported it, and the Tucson Presidio that protected it.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties defines four treatments: Preservation, Rehabilitation, Restoration, and Reconstruction. These treatments were devised in a hierarchy of preference and authenticity. Thus, it is better to preserve than rehabilitate; better to rehabilitate than to restore; better to restore than to reconstruct. As defined by the Secretary of the Interior:

*Reconstruction recreates vanished or non-surviving portions of a property for interpretive purposes when documentary and physical evidence is available to permit accurate reconstruction with minimal conjecture and such reconstruction is essential to the public understanding of the property . . . A reconstruction will be clearly identified as a contemporary re-creation.*

Analysis of these standards provides sufficient evidence of the inappropriateness of reconstruction as a treatment in the case of the convento. First, reconstruction as a treatment was only intended to re-create *portions* of a property, not the entire property, as in the case of the San Agustín Mission. This implies the existence of some remnant of the property, such as was the case in the reconstruction of the buildings at Williamsburg. Second, lacking the physical evidence, the documentary evidence for the convento – exterior photographs of an unplastered ruin and written descriptions – leave much to conjecture regarding the internal spatial relationships, structural systems, and wall treatments of the original building as it appeared before the advent of photography. Third, if the convento is to be more than just an icon for the larger mission site, then reconstruction must include the entire complex, including its chapel, granary, gardens, and acequias, to convey a legitimate public understanding of the property. And fourth, how does a reconstruction

accurately educate the public about that period's building materials, construction technologies, and other physical qualities while clearly being identified as a contemporary re-creation?

Compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards provides historic properties with the legitimacy sought in a project as prominent as Rio Nuevo. The guidelines continue to advise that if sufficient information is not available, it is better to interpret the lost building through other media, than to run the risk of fabricating an expensive historical untruth. In Philadelphia, the structures around Benjamin Franklin's house were heavily restored by the National Park Service based on existing physical and documentary evidence. In the case of Benjamin Franklin's actual house, the National Park Service concluded that there was insufficient information to create a credible reconstruction, and a full-scale, three-dimensional, metal frame of the house was erected – along with outdoor exhibit materials – to represent and interpret the site. I am not advocating for a steel frame outline of the convento. Rather, we should look at creative ways to represent the convento, and its context, that will satisfy the educational as well as experiential goals expressed in the Rio Nuevo proposal without falsifying the authenticity of the original building.

By re-creating an historic artifact, we also devalue the truly authentic historic structures, such as Mission San Xavier, which deserves to remain as the symbol of the Spanish Colonial presence in Tucson. Rebuilding the convento, in the context of the contemporary tourist-oriented development of Rio Nuevo, would serve more as a Disneyland-esque stage prop, just as its ruin did for late nineteenth and early twentieth century curiosity-seekers, as represented in their photographs.

Umberto Eco, in his influential 1961 essay, "Travels in Hyperreality" first coined that term to describe the pseudo-places of his American travels. He described places like Disneyland (and now Las Vegas) as where, "the American imagination demands the real thing and to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake." Any reconstruction of the convento would be a fake; a dishonor to the authenticity of extant historic structures and the validity of Rio Nuevo's attempt to interpret Tucson's cultural identity.

Visit Río Nuevo's website at: <http://www.río-nuevo.org>

## COUNTERPOINT: Reconstruction Can Work!

Marty McCune, Historic Preservation Officer, City of Tucson

**R**ECONSTRUCTION IS a controversial and expensive means of interpreting historic buildings. However, if done properly and labeled appropriately, reconstruction can provide an experience for the visitor that other means of interpretation cannot. Size, scale, and use of materials can all be conveyed better by looking at an actual building than through photos, metal frames, or computer-generated images.

While Brooks is correct in that the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Reconstruction are usually applied to a missing part of a building such as a cornice or piece of trim, one of the Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties does address reconstruction of buildings or sites and provides guidance for how that should be accomplished. These suggestions include preceding reconstruction with thorough archaeology, as well as preserving remaining historic materials, features, and spatial relationships.

The National Park Service has completed at least one entire reconstruction that has been a resounding success – Bent's Old Fort in La Junta, Colorado, which was dedicated in July 1976, as part of the nation's two-hundredth birthday and the one-hundredth anniversary of Colorado statehood. Merrill J. Mattes, a Park Service historic interpretation specialist, wrote:

*All who have visited the project have marveled at the detailed authenticity... Call it reconstruction if you want to be technical, but to those who waited so long it is truly a resurrection.*

Detailed plans for the San Agustín Mission complex have not yet been formulated, but the intention is to provide a variety of means of interpretation of the different eras and resources available on this rich site. Recent excavations have uncovered evidence of habitation from 3,000 years ago, as well as use of the site in the late 1800s by Chinese farmers and the Carrillo family. Resources in various stages of preservation are present on the site – some may be interpreted through display of actual archaeological remains such as the perimeter wall of the mission complex. The Mission Gardens will be recreated by planting fruit trees and other crops that were grown when the mission was active. It is also possible that at least one pithouse will be “built” by constructing a wood frame and covering it with reeds to show the prehistoric architecture.

The other point about doing reconstruction on this site is that we have excellent information from diverse sources. Excavations in the mid-1950s documented the

foundation and floor plan of the convento; photographs of the deteriorating building show size, location, and style of windows; and historical accounts provide us with still more information about the building. What the interior might have looked like is an area of some conjecture, though missions in Mexico had similar structures from which we can glean information. In addition, the surrounding open space provides a rare opportunity to recreate the environment around the building as part of the interpretive plan. Perhaps the most difficult issue is the intended use of the reconstructed building – as a museum with exhibits, as “house museum” with period furnishings, or as something altogether different, such as community meeting or event space. This will also affect the interpretation needed to convey the meaning of the structure.

There are many ways to interpret historical remnants – from exhibits to viewing actual artifacts to partial or complete reconstructions. Each way has its strong and weak points and will highlight diverse elements of the resource being interpreted. For the convento – different from what is available to be viewed at San Xavier – reconstruction can provide a unique experience to learn about this period of Tucson's rich history.

### Point:Counterpoint Background

Not everyone believes that reconstruction of historical buildings is the best interpretive approach. To engage this issue and to give it a Rio Nuevo focus, we asked Brooks Jeffery and Marty McCune to argue the pros and cons of reconstructing all or part of the San Agustín Mission.



*Photographs document the decline of the San Agustín Convento over a period of 75 years. This photo from the 1890s is one of the best. (Courtesy of Arizona Historical Society, photo 2535.)*