Abstract

Title: Evolution of Cultural Heritage Conservation in the United States and the Conservation of Traditional Cultural Significance at an Ethnic Living Heritage Site in Northern New Mexico: El Santuario de Chimayó

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The purpose of this thesis is to bring awareness of the importance of intangible cultural heritage in historic preservation. In particular, living ethnic heritage sites have suffered from lack of recognition in the National Register of Historic Places, as key elements connected to ethnic communities are often ignored in the process. My thesis develops a methodology and framework for El Santuario de Chimayó, an ethnic living heritage site in Northern New Mexico, that identifies and protects the intangible cultural heritage values that are manifested in tangible forms to maintain a balance between the site’s traditional cultural significance and the increased growth in visitor traffic. Currently, interventions are a threat to the integrity of the site. In addition, poor communication between the local community, Archdiocese, New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office, and randomly hired contractors affect this process. As a result of existing conflict, a comprehensive preservation plan is deemed impossible.

I conducted an in-depth research of cultural diversity in historic preservation and identified key sources to assess traditional cultural significance of the site and to develop a framework for the evaluation of past, present, and future interventions. In addition, I have provided a detailed narrative of El Santuario de Chimayó, which identifies problems and challenges that threaten the site’s traditional cultural resources. Throughout the study, I highlighted instances where interventions conflict with traditional values. The evaluations exemplified how failure to identify traditional cultural significance undermines the integrity of the site. Finally, I made recommendations that address the importance of intangible cultural heritage in the decision making process at El Santuario de Chimayó.

This thesis concludes with the hope that the field of historic preservation recognizes traditional values of ethnic living heritage sites. The interactions and interrelations between intangible and tangible cultural heritage play an integral role in the design process. If the profession cannot integrate these new values, historic preservation will fail in representing the diverse people of the United States and will continue to support the views of cultural homogeny, national significance, and assimilation.