

The Spirit of Claremont: Seven virtues that keep our town a good and special place

by Ted Trzyna

If people understand the place where they live, they are more likely to want to protect its identity, heritage, and quality of life. One effective way of promoting such understanding is to depict the *spirit of a place* by drawing on the positive values represented in its history.

I've been working with this concept as a consultant in other places, as well as in an international environmental policy group that I lead, and decided to try it out on the town where I've lived on and off for over 50 years.

As I see it, the Spirit of Claremont consists of seven basic values, or virtues, drawn from the town's tangible and intangible heritage:

1. *An American town, a California town*

First of all, and above all, Claremont is a town in the United States, whose ideals are set forth in its founding documents. It is a town in California, whose state Constitution and laws provide additional protections and responsibilities. And it is a *Californian* town: Its story has been shaped by California's landscape, climate, and dynamic society.

2. *A cooperative culture*

Claremont's cooperative culture started with its founding by the New England Congregationalists who started Pomona College in 1887. They organized a town hall along New England lines, and this kind of participatory democracy persists until today, including in what is often called the "Claremont process," a practice of civil discourse and wide consultation on local issues.

3. A strong connection to nature, both urban and wild

Claremont is known for its street trees, city parks, and well-landscaped campuses and residences. It has been in the forefront of California cities in promoting sustainability. The Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden is a leader in research, education, and horticulture related to California native plants. The San Gabriel Mountains are much more than a backdrop; Claremont's citizens have strongly supported expansion of the municipal Claremont Hills Wilderness Park, which shares a boundary with Angeles National Forest and the new San Gabriel Mountains National Monument.

4. A striving for excellence in education

The Claremont Colleges, based on bringing the Oxford model to the United States, are recognized globally as a leading center of liberal arts education. Claremont would not be what it is without these institutions and their faculty and staff members and students. The striving for excellence in education extends to public and private K-12 schools.

5. A supportive home for artists and the arts

Claremont has attracted first-rate architecture and landscape architecture since the early 20th century, both on the campuses and in the town at large. Starting in the 1930s, Claremont became an important art colony. The works and records of the painters, sculptors, ceramicists, and others who made up that colony are preserved, exhibited, and interpreted by Claremont's museums, libraries, and private galleries. Several organizations encourage new generations of Claremont artists. Claremont has also been a supportive home for music of all kinds, for theater, and for writers, photographers, and filmmakers.

6. An inclusive and tolerant community

Women have had important roles in Claremont since its very beginning. In her book *Claremont Women, 1887-1950*, Judy Wright says "men built the college(s), and the women built the town." At times women have held a majority, even all five, of the City Council's seats.

Although the town's founders belonged to one Christian denomination, members of other denominations were welcome to join its congregation, often until they decided there were enough members of their particular

denomination to organize a separate church. Jews have been prominent members of the community. The Claremont Colleges have an unusual arrangement in which four chaplains — Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, and Roman Catholic — are based at an interfaith center for religious activities.

Religious institutions have led in combating racial discrimination. In the mid-1900s, this had to do mainly with segregation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. An Intercultural Council came up with an innovative project that gained national attention. Next to a Mexican American barrio, twelve modern homes were built around a common area, half of which were sold to Mexican American families and half to others. These houses are now on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Padua Hills Theater, housed in Spanish Revival buildings on a hill overlooking Claremont, presented Mexican-theme musicals from 1931-1974. It was started by a group of Claremont residents to inform the public about the culture of Mexico and early California, and foster positive relations between Mexican Americans and other Americans. The theater complex is also on the National Register of Historic Places.

As in many American college towns, Claremont's academic community has tended to be politically liberal, but an important conservative element has been centered here since the 1960s, based on the teachings of the political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899-1973). This has enriched discussions of philosophical and public policy issues, although at times relations between the two camps have seemed more like peaceful coexistence rather than mutual tolerance.

Retirement homes and their residents have played a big role in community life. These include Pilgrim Place, started in 1915 for missionaries returning from abroad, and now open to people who have demonstrated "a sustained commitment of service to others through a local or global cause."

Over the years, the Claremont community has become increasingly respectful of differences in ethnicity, generations, lifestyles, and sexual orientation.

7. A commitment to preserve and build on this heritage

Fortunately, awareness of Claremont's tangible and intangible heritage is increasing, and so have efforts to preserve and draw from it. The stewards of this heritage are the city government, the school district, and a set of very active civic organizations.

To save space (and avoid having to make choices), I've refrained from mentioning names of individual people, but of course it is individuals, families, and small groups, acting alone or through formal organizations, publicly or behind the scenes, who have made all the difference.

Seven virtues, one indivisible spirit

There is nothing new about the individual elements of these seven virtues; most are well known and mentioned frequently in conversations and public meetings. What is different is arranging them in a structure called the Spirit of Claremont. The parts of this structure support each other and make up an indivisible whole.

[A longer version of this essay is posted at Spirit.InterEnvironment.org.](http://Spirit.InterEnvironment.org)

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