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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.

The example I use is the California college town where I've lived on and off for over 50 years, but I touch on other cases and will be looking for more, both in this country and abroad. This is part of a larger project being conducted by InterEnvironment Institute that aims to contribute to national and international efforts to bring together protection and interpretation of nature, history, and culture. That effort has been centered in the World Heritage system and the U.S. National Park Service.¹

Spirit of place

“Spirit of place” and “sense of place” are slippery terms. They usually refer to aesthetics and other physical attributes of places, rather than the people who live and have lived here, or the images about those places that people hold in their minds.

I like the definition used by ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, which links the tangible and the intangible:

“Spirit of place is defined as the tangible (buildings, sites, landscapes, routes, objects) and the intangible elements (memories, narratives, written documents, rituals, festivals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, colors, odors, etc.), that is to say the physical and the spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion and mystery to place. Rather than separate spirit from place, the intangible from the tangible, and consider them as opposed

to each other, we have investigated the many ways in which the two interact and mutually construct one another.”²

THE SPIRIT OF CLAREMONT: SEVEN VIRTUES

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 the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. 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. What James Bryce wrote in 1888 in his book *The American Commonwealth* is still valid: “California, more than any other part of the Union, is a country by itself ... it has grown up in its own way and acquired a sort of consciousness of separate existence.”

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. A major factor in continuing this culture is an excellent weekly newspaper, the *Claremont Courier*.

Symbols of this intangible heritage include City Hall and the buildings of the Claremont United Church of Christ, which are on the site of the original Congregational church built in 1906.

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 localities in promoting sustainability. The 85-acre 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 in the foothills. The higher reaches, protected in Angeles National Forest and the new San Gabriel Mountains National Monument, are heavily used for recreation.

Symbols of this strong connection to nature are the trees and parks themselves, and 10,000-foot Mount Baldy, especially when a winter storm caps it with snow.

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. They include Claremont McKenna, Harvey Mudd, Pitzer, Pomona, and Scripps colleges, Claremont Graduate University, and Keck Graduate Institute. 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.

Symbols of this dedication to learning include the striking mosaic murals on the portico of Garrison Theater of Scripps College depicting characters from Shakespeare plays, and the slogan on the gates of Pomona College: "They only are loyal to this college who, departing, bear their added riches in trust for mankind."

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 the Claremont Colleges' art programs, museums, and libraries; Claremont Heritage; the Claremont Museum of Art; and private galleries. These organizations, as well as the Rembrandt Club of Pomona College and the Scripps College Fine Arts Foundation (both open to the public), 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.

Symbols of this dedication to the arts include public art, the museums, and many examples of fine architecture and landscape design.

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 that “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.

The churches, as well as Temple Beth Israel, 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, spawned by a committee of the Congregational church, 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, six of which were sold to Mexican American families, one to an African American family, and the rest to European Americans. These Intercultural Council 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.” Its annual festival attracts thousands from throughout the region.

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

Symbolic of this inclusiveness and mutual toleration is Memorial Park on the Fourth of July: Booths and a parade represent a spectrum of interest groups, political parties, and religious organizations; a traditional speakers’ corner is open to all points of view (as long as they sign up in advance); and people mingle in the shade of the trees until a fire engine’s siren announces the start of the parade.

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 (City Council, City Manager, commissions, and ad hoc advisory groups), the School Board, and a set of very active civic organizations. These include, among others, Claremont Heritage, the Claremont Interfaith Council, the Claremont Wildlands Conservancy, the League of Women Voters of Claremont, and Sustainable Claremont. The Claremont Colleges Library has a special collection of materials about Claremont.

Symbols of this commitment to preserve and build on Claremont’s heritage include the Garner House in Memorial Park, headquarters of Claremont Heritage; the Santa Fe Depot, renovated to house the Claremont Museum of Art; and the Padua Hills Theater, refurbished and maintained by Pomona College.

Seven virtues, one indivisible spirit

There is nothing new about the individual elements of these seven virtues; most of them 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.

In describing the virtues, I've avoided 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. The roles of many of these people are described in Judy Wright's local histories.³

EXPLANATIONS AND EXAMPLES

What about the negatives?

Is it wrong to focus just on the positive? Although most of the local people to whom I circulated an earlier version of this paper liked the concept, one of them thought the Claremont example was *Pollyannish*, that is, excessively or blindly optimistic.

I came across a similar comment in a newly published collection of essays by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt: "We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will [bury] in oblivion."⁴

I started to put together a list of negative points, but realized many of them depend on a person's point of view. For example, *Sunset* magazine in 2016 named Claremont the best suburb in the West, a place that "blends worldly sophistication with small-town appeal."⁵ For some residents, more sophistication would be a negative; for others, the opposite.

(In any case, I don't like the word "suburb" applied to Claremont. It's a college town that has been surrounded by suburbs. This was sort of recognized later on in the *Sunset* article: Claremont is "geographically a Los Angeles suburb. Spiritually, it's distinct.")

Three negatives bear mentioning: *Racism*. The community hasn't been free of racism. The efforts to counter it have been needed because of racial prejudice. *Urban sprawl*. Undifferentiated suburban development has surrounded Claremont, giving it a closed-in feeling. *Paving of streams*. Destructive floods led to creeks being channeled and paved. Flood control was needed, but there were sound alternatives that would have preserved natural tree-lined corridors.

Should the description of the spirit of a place include such negatives? Perhaps, but I think I'll stick with the positives.

Do other towns in our region have spirits of place?

I think every town has a spirit of place. More accurately, a spirit of place document could be constructed for any town from elements such as those I've set out for Claremont. Some localities will have stronger spirits of place than others, and this seems to have little to do with economic status: Many less affluent places have local historical societies and museums. The local heritage collections of public libraries can be rich sources of information and ideas for writing about the local spirit of place.

Spirit of place and strategic planning

How does this relate to the widely used strategic planning process that involves a committee or a whole community in describing core values, a vision, a mission, goals, and so forth? (The City of Claremont recently started such an exercise, which is unrelated to my project.)

Certainly a spirit of place document will be useful to a strategic planning project, but it is a different thing. It is best done by an experienced writer who knows how to pull together and structure a lot of different ideas and relate them to the history and ideals of Western civilization. As the scholar-diplomat Harlan Cleveland wrote, "The best interdisciplinary instrument is still the individual human mind."⁶

Examples from other places

Hawai'i

Working on a project in Hawai'i recently, I became aware of three important themes needing recognition:

- Harmony, which refers to diverse people living together peacefully and respectfully.
- Discovery, which refers to exploration of the ocean by Native Hawaiians, to discoveries in the Universe through the telescopes on Hawai'i's mountains, and to the pursuit of knowledge generally.
- Culture and nature, referring to the inseparability of cultural and

natural heritage, a powerful concept that is central to Native Hawaiian beliefs and underlies most heritage education and interpretation in the Islands.

Two National Heritage Areas in the Northeastern U.S.

A partnership program of the U.S. National Park Service, National Heritage Areas offer good examples of how positive values can be associated with local areas:

Freedom's Way National Heritage Area in northern Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire, which includes Lexington and Concord. Themes:

- “The New England community, shaped by concepts of the common good.”
- The Transcendental Movement, “which provided a conceptual framework for the appreciation of both the natural and cultural worlds and the rights of humans to live freely within it, a concept that continues to resonate throughout the world.”

Hudson River National Heritage Area in New York State. Themes:

- “Freedom and Dignity,” which relates to sites of the Revolutionary War, the homes of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt, and associations with Theodore Roosevelt.
- “Nature and Culture,” which relates to art and literature: Paintings by artists such as Albert Bierstadt and writings by authors such as Washington Irving “shaped American attitudes toward nature. Their portrayals of people living in harmony with nature, a view also reflected in the valley’s legends and folklore, helped mold a national identity and American aesthetic.”

NOTES

I appreciate support for earlier stages of this project from the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature).

For those interested in delving into the large literature on place, a good place to start is Ted Relph's website, Placeness, Place, Placelessness, www.placeness.com.

1. Ted Trzyna. "Connecting people, nature, and culture through metropolitan conservation alliances." Background paper for a workshop at the 2017 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites, Norfolk, Virginia. Claremont: InterEnvironment Institute, 2017. Posted at www.NaturalNeighbors.org.

2. ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites). *Québec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place*, 2008. Posted at www.icomos.org.

3. Hannah Arendt. "Values in contemporary society." In *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975* (New York: Schocken, 2018): 439.

4. Judy Wright. *Claremont: A Pictorial History*. Claremont: Claremont Historic Resources, 1999. *Claremont Women 1887-1950: They Created a Culture*. Claremont: Claremont Historic Resources, 2007. Both available from Claremont Heritage.

5. Bruce Anderson et al. "5 Best Communities in the West." *Sunset*, February 2016. The Claremont entry is reproduced below.

6. Harlan Cleveland. *The Knowledge Executive: Leadership in an Information Society*. New York: Truman Talley Books, 1985.

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From *Sunset*, February 2016. See my comment on page 6 about the word “suburb.”

Best suburb: Claremont, CA

Every spring, prospective students and their parents make the pilgrimage to Claremont, California, to tour the seven campuses of the renowned Claremont Colleges. They also discover a small city that blends worldly sophistication with small-town appeal.

About 30 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, and joined to it by Interstate 10 and Metrolink trains, Claremont is, geographically, a Los Angeles suburb. Spiritually, it's distinct. In the neighborhoods along Indian Hill Boulevard, American elms shade streets lined by vintage cottages and Craftsman bungalows. A few minutes' walk from the campuses, Claremont's compact downtown (known to everyone as The Village) mixes contemporary restaurants and boutiques with local landmarks that grads from the 1980s remember from their days at Scripps or Pomona.

Claremont visitors always mean it as compliment when they conclude that this smart, leafy community (“the city of trees and PhDs”) reminds them of a college town back East. But Claremont is no Wellesley wannabe. It's Californian through and through, a onetime citrus town with easy access to both the wilds of the San Gabriel Mountains and the culture of Los Angeles. Claremont strives to preserve its character, even as it evolves. For longtime and newer residents, it's that small-town-meets-big-world connection that defines Claremont.