

THE APPLICATION OF NARRATIVE TO THE CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS

PETER LAMARQUE AND NIGEL WALTER

The paper is a dialogue between a conservation architect who works on medieval churches and an analytic aesthetician interested in the principles underlying restoration and conservation. The focus of the debate is the explanatory role of narrative in understanding and justifying elective changes to historic buildings. For the architect this is a fruitful model and offers a basis for a genuinely new approach to a philosophy of conservation. The philosopher, however, has been sceptical about appeals to narrative in other contexts (for example, self-identity), and rehearses some reasons for this scepticism. The dialogue explores the pros and cons of the narrative approach to conservation and seeks to forge a compromise that acknowledges concerns about inflated claims for narrative while pursuing the merits of this particular application.

This paper has been jointly authored by a conservation architect and a philosopher with a shared interest in the principles of restoration and conservation, as well as in the nature and role of narrative. It seeks to bring together two distinct approaches to some issues of common interest, and to see how the one might inform the other. The paper has been written as a dialogue, which seems an appropriate form for this interdisciplinary exploration.

Nigel Walter (NW): Three terms of importance to historic building conservation are worth defining at the outset. *Restoration* is an emotive term; in the nineteenth century it was used to describe the conjectural reinvention of old buildings in a historic idiom. The reaction to this, *preservation*, aims to retain a building in its current state, with minimal intervention. William Morris's founding manifesto for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB)¹ is a passionate appeal to put protection (preservation) in the place of restoration; while belonging to the early days of modern conservation in the United Kingdom, its influence endures. *Conservation* positions itself in the middle ground between these two terms, and in contemporary usage is often defined as the management of change.² Other key notions in contemporary conservation include *significance* (understood to comprise discrete values attached by people to historic buildings under four classes – evidential, historical, aesthetic, and communal) and *character*.

¹ Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 'The SPAB Manifesto' (1877), <https://www.spab.org.uk/about-us/spab-manifesto>.

² *Conservation Principles: Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (London: English Heritage, 2008), 71.



It is these last two that conservation professionals task themselves with conserving.

As a discipline, however, conservation is often better at analysing something into parts, usually in terms of art history, than accounting for the cultural whole that initially produced, and in many cases continues to shape, historic buildings. It also often struggles to engage with the communities and individuals responsible for these buildings. For me, the exemplary case is the medieval parish church, which has undergone change – both additive and subtractive – in almost every generation. Historic buildings such as these are often referred to as ‘living’, and to me are best seen not as completed works of art, but as ongoing communal narratives. In using this metaphor, I am seeking to bring together three key elements – first, that *continuity* is as important as time-depth in understanding historic buildings; second, that buildings that are still subject to change (that is, ‘living buildings’ as opposed to ‘dead monuments’) are *mid-narrative*, that our knowledge is always incomplete because we cannot yet know the full story; and third, that the most interesting buildings are created by *communities*, and in turn create community, in a complex interrelation.³

From my professional experience working with community groups, framing historic buildings in narrative terms can be very powerful, enabling people to reconnect with something they know is important but over which they often have little say because it has been rendered specialized and technical. I am aware that some, including yourself, are sceptical of the claims made for the broader explanatory value of narrative, particularly to questions of personal identity. I am keen, therefore, to test the robustness of this narrativity thesis as I am seeking to apply it to historic buildings.⁴

Peter Lamarque (PL): You have helpfully laid out some of the basic terms at the heart of this debate – restoration, preservation, conservation, significance, and

³ There are of course many other ways of theorising the problems of conservation/restoration. The philosopher Robert Wicks, for example, distinguishes a “Platonic” model of architectural restoration, the aim of which is ‘to restore the work in accord with a conception of its idealized, perfected appearance’ and an “Historical” model, with its aim ‘to restore the work in a manner which best preserves its temporal continuity’. Robert Wicks, ‘Architectural Restoration: Resurrection or Replication?’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994): 166. Wicks presents arguments in favour of the Platonic approach but the historical approach he rejects has, in spite of appearances, only superficial similarities to the narrative approach here. The debate is taken up in A. MacC. Armstrong, ‘The Identity of a Work of Architecture’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995): 165–67.

⁴ For an indication of the breadth of application of the idea of narrative, see David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005); Ivor Goodson et al., eds., *The Routledge International Handbook on Narrative and Life History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).



character. It is interesting that you note continuing unease with the connotations surrounding 'restoration' (you say the term is emotive), and we are both well aware of the hostility and suspicion that the term evoked in John Ruskin, which led to William Morris's SPAB manifesto of 1877. A similar hostility, I know, is still in evidence now in conservation circles. Your own work, as an architect, on medieval parish churches does not fall naturally under any of the descriptive terms introduced; indeed, I take it that your theoretical interest in narrative is partly motivated by the search for an appropriate way of characterizing and finding a rationale for this work.

NW: That is indeed the spur that prompted this practitioner's excursion into philosophy. Conservation is woefully under-theorized, much to its detriment; 'conservation philosophy', where referred to at all, amounts to no more than 'approaches' or second-hand ideas, with seldom any reference to any recognized philosophers. Narrative theory presents what appears to be a good match for the requirements of a serviceable conservation theory.

PL: Let's turn to narrative in a minute. It is potentially a point of disagreement between us, although this is a new domain of application to me and I keep an entirely open mind as to its fruitfulness. This is what we are here to explore.

A useful point of departure for our dialogue is recognizing the potential value in bringing our two, one might suppose radically different, perspectives to bear on matters of mutual interest, you as a practising architect involved with historic churches, me as an academic philosopher with a background in philosophical aesthetics. Clearly, we hope for a mutually illuminating confluence of theory and practice! We should acknowledge, though, that we are not entirely poles apart in where we start, even on the theory–practice axis. You have published several papers that themselves combine theory and practice and you have developed your narrativity thesis in detail in earlier work.⁵ And, on my side, I have tried my hand at writing about conservation and restoration, discussing, incidentally, the very strictures from Ruskin and Morris against invasive restoration that you have mentioned.⁶ So there is some convergence prior to this dialogue. Furthermore, you have drawn on philosophy in your writing, notably phenomenology and hermeneutics, citing the likes of Martin Heidegger and Paul

⁵ Nigel Walter, 'From Values to Narrative: A New Foundation for the Conservation of Historic Buildings', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20 (2014): 634–50; 'On Statements of Significance', *EASA Transactions* 8 (2015): 1–10; 'Everyone Loves a Good Story: Narrative, Tradition and Public Participation in Conservation', in *Heritage, Conservation and Communities: Engagement, Participation and Capacity Building*, ed. Gill Chitty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 50–64.

⁶ Peter Lamarque, 'Reflections on the Ethics and Aesthetics of Restoration and Conservation', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2016): 281–99.

Ricoeur, and also Alasdair McIntyre on narrative. You know that my own background is in analytic philosophy, in particular analytical approaches to aesthetics, so that could be a point of divergence, although not necessarily so. At least the appeal to philosophy is common ground.

NW: I agree there is a good deal of common ground. One point of difference worth pointing out, however, relates to the area of application we each have in mind. In your 2016 article you address a variety of conservation responses to damage to works of art or architecture; my particular concern is with *elective* change to historic buildings, for example when a church wishes to remove pews to accommodate greater liturgical flexibility or additional communal uses. Central to the latter is the distinction between 'living buildings' that are still in use, often for the purpose for which they were originally built, and ('dead') monuments where the priority is simple preservation. It is for these 'living buildings' whose life depends on the health of a local 'core' community that narrative appears to offer a foundation from which to build a conservation theory.

PL: Why appeal to narrative? Part of your motivation is dissatisfaction with some standard models. You object to *restoration*, of the kind that SPAB targets, on the grounds that it seeks, as you have it, to 'overwrite the authentic, messy, multi-layered historical grain with a revisionist historiographical ideal, a sanitized history, comfortable, consistent and neatly packaged'.⁷ Yet you hold that the SPAB conception of *conservation* is also at fault in that it 'reduce[s] the conserved artefact to a mere object from a hallowed past without creative impact in the present'.⁸ In turn you also reject a kind of free-for-all 'postmodern approach' that 'subverts the multi-layered cultural achievements of the past to the limited cultural horizon of the changing present'.⁹ Your claim is that thinking of a building as an 'ongoing and developing narrative' avoids these problems and has, you argue, strong features in its favour.¹⁰ For example, it allows that buildings (even ancient ones) are still 'living' and thus suitably constrained changes to them can be seen as a continuation of an ongoing narrative; it gives additional force to the idea that buildings have character, which, like human personality, can develop and grow; it encourages input from local communities and interested parties in sharing, owning, and exploring the narrative; and it can find a place for meaning and (non-human) agency in the life of a building. I agree that all of this sounds congenial and seems to mark an improvement over the standard models on offer.

⁷ Walter, 'From Values to Narrative', 643.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 644.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 645.

So what is it that has made me sceptical or at least wary of appeals to narrative, particularly in the context of understanding human self-awareness or self-identity?¹¹ And might those worries apply to your own application? I have a number of concerns. One is the sheer variety of what counts as narrative, big and small, significant and insignificant. A narrative is any kind of story, from *War and Peace* to neighbourly chit-chat over the garden fence. The ubiquity and diversity of narrative in human lives might seem a strength but in fact speaks only to the very minimal conditions for identifying narrative. Some narratives are exciting or world-changing or creative, others (perhaps most) are boring or poorly told or of no significance at all. There is no inherent value in being a narrative.

Another concern is the frequent eliding of lives and narratives. Lives are lived, narratives are told. Lives are not narratives but they might be the subject of narratives. Narratives represent events (real or imaginary) but they are never identical to the events they represent. No one lives in a narrative; we all live in the world. There might be narratives about limited parts of our lives but most of our lives remain unnarrated. Furthermore, there is no narrative without narration: a narrative must be narrated (that is, told, in writing, speech, or depiction) in order to exist. There may be possible narratives that have not been narrated but a merely possible narrative is not a narrative, any more than a possible victory is a victory.

The truth is that few of us bother to narrate our lives. At best we tell mini-narratives, about ourselves or others, representing limited sequences of events as some localized interest arises. The idea that we exist in an overarching life narrative is simply not true; we live our lives and narrate tiny bits of them, snippets that are often inaccurate, self-interested, and self-deceived. Self-narratives are largely unreliable and always incomplete. Nor is it true that our self-identity (the same 'me' carried across time) relies in some essential way on narrative. It might be true, as Locke thought, that personal identity rests essentially on memory and that the reporting of memory often takes the form of narrative. But memory does not need to be in narrative form. Some people summon their memories through stories, some rely on imagery alone to bring past events to mind.

¹¹ See Peter Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). Lamarque's sceptical stance has been challenged, for example, in Anthony Rudd, 'In Defence of Narrativity,' *European Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2007): 60–75; Marya Schechtman, 'The Narrative Self,' in *Oxford Handbook of the Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 394–418; 'Art Imitating Life Imitating Art: Literary Narrative and Autobiographical Narrative,' in *The Philosophy of Autobiography*, ed. Christopher Cowley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 22–38.

Finally, all narratives are perspectival; they are told from a point of view that selects items for inclusion, connects them, and finds significance in them. For any given event, there are as many narratives as there are people who witnessed or can reflect on the event. This does not mean that all narratives are *fictions* because there are conventional constraints on those narratives we call 'fact-stating': for example, that they should strive for accuracy and faithfulness to the facts. But the point about perspective and significance at least raises a question about the ideal of *truth* in narratives and the criteria under which significance, relevance, and accuracy are evaluated.

These concerns are simply stated and not elaborated. But even in this crude form I think they pose questions for your narrative account that should be addressed. If a historic church is (or is associated with) a narrative, what is the source of that narrative? It is likely there will be multiple narratives – more realistically, incomplete bits of narrative – about any church. (Remember that a possible narrative is not yet a narrative.) Whose narratives should be considered? How do we assess these narratives, particularly where the perspectives are radically different (as is likely)? So far, these questions apply only to backward-looking narratives, narratives of the past. Even greater problems arise about narratives stretching into the future. How do we evaluate these? What makes one more suitable as a course of action than another? Appealing to community involvement in narratives seems itself to offer few constraints on decision-making. A community liable to disagree about projected changes to their church will not, I surmise, be helpfully guided by recourse to narrative. There is always a narrative that could be told that fits any proposed development for a church, including perhaps just the kind of invasive restoration that so upset Ruskin. The question of values cannot be ducked. What values make one set of changes more acceptable than another? Perhaps an egregious break with a past-directed narrative might be a reason for rejection but anyone with a penchant for storytelling could make a plausible case, just as silver-tongued developers can sound persuasive on locally unpopular building plans.

So we keep reverting back to constraints on narratives. Perhaps thinking of a historic building as a narrative has theoretical plausibility for the reasons given. But its ultimate test must come in its practical application.

NW: Thank you for raising these concerns. Before responding to each in turn, I should provide some context. My research is in large part a response to some deep-seated problems with the practice of how we deal with historic buildings, including the ease with which non-professional voices are excluded from the decision-making process. I am therefore all the time listening for the practical implications of theoretical assertions. My focus follows Gadamer's assertion

that ‘application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but co-determines it as a whole from the beginning’.¹² The relation of the specialist to the non-specialist is of course a theme of some urgency in academia’s relation to the economy and society as a whole – the ‘impact agenda’ – and for the culture more broadly.

The first of your concerns, that the near ubiquity of narrative renders it unremarkable, relates to the question of the status of the non-professional. Proponents of narrative articulate the mirror image of this first concern; for example, David Carr suggests that narrative is so readily comprehensible precisely because it ‘seems to borrow its form from the very action it is about’ in contrast to more determinative ‘scientific’ forms of explanation which depart from everyday discourse.¹³ I label this the ‘simplicity argument’ and count it a virtue rather than a failing. Like you, Galen Strawson is suspicious of the popularity of narrativism, but goes further in asserting that ‘theorizing human beings tend to favour false views in matters of this kind’.¹⁴ Given that narrativism clearly has such broad resonance, Strawson’s attack on the ‘theorizers’ is likely to alienate numerous non-theorizers also; in the non-professional context in which I am seeking to apply a narrative approach, his view appears dismissive and untenable. Heritage studies, recently developed as a sub-discipline of archaeology, is very much concerned with the terms on which professionals and non-professionals engage, and in that context a theoretical approach that goes with the grain of how local communities relate to their heritage, as I argue narrative does, is an asset rather than a liability. Certainly, my experience as a practitioner is that narrative *works* where other current forms of theory do not, and I would be reluctant to forego such a substantial benefit without a better alternative on offer.

PL: We have little disagreement here. My alluding to the ubiquity of narrative was not intended to dismiss appeals to narrative or to belittle those for whom telling stories is an important mode of communication. It was merely a reminder that narratives come in all shapes and sizes – at root just describing and connecting events, regardless of how important or trivial the events might be – so identifying narratives in human discourse is in itself neither surprising nor inherently significant. You say that ‘narrative *works* where other current forms of theory do not’. That is an interesting claim and it must be tested. The key is to explain how appeals to narrative can guide and constrain conservation decisions.

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 324.

¹³ David Carr, ‘Narrative Explanation and Its Malcontents’, *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 20.

¹⁴ Galen Strawson, ‘Against Narrativity’, *Ratio* 17 (2004): 439.



NW: Your second issue relates to the eliding of lives and narratives, and the claims made for the role of narrative in personal identity; I understand your concern to be that narrative can be used to provide a false and unhealthy constraint on an individual's self-description.¹⁵ I too would resist an idea of narrative as wholly determinative, an ultimate grounding for identity and moral responsibility, in action and across time; if this is what the anti-narrativists have in mind then I agree that this is potentially dangerous and distorting. But this is not what I at least see to be the usefulness of narrative. Rather than providing definitive answers, I see narrative as a means of keeping one's identity (or, in a conservation context, the identity of a historic building) *in play*, that is, still capable of change within the boundedness of continuity. In commenting on Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*,¹⁶ William Dowling identifies

the double temporality of narrative structure: a *telos* that carries characters forward in a state of imperfect knowledge about the consequences of their actions, with a narrator who, gazing backward on events from a fixed or *totum simul* perspective, has arrived at certain conclusions about their meaning or significance.¹⁷

This notion of double temporality is central to Ricoeur's philosophy of time – that the experience from within the narrative is *contingent*, and that it is only the narrator, standing at the end of the story looking back, who can truly assign conclusions about the meaning and significance of the events retold; in this, Ricoeur seems to be reworking Søren Kierkegaard's observation that life can only be understood backwards, but has to be lived forwards. What narrative offers, therefore, is an orientation as much to the future as to the past – in marked contrast to the aesthetic-historical orientation still prevalent within conservation – and an account of the relation of whole to part, which Ricoeur, following Louis Mink, refers to as a 'grasping together'.¹⁸

PL: There are several different issues here but two stand out. The first is the worry that self-narratives and third-person narratives can just as easily distort or falsify a person's identity as they can clarify or yield knowledge. If that is true of narratives and persons then there is at least the danger that it could also be true of narratives and historic buildings. Nothing you say here entirely reassures me on that account.

¹⁵ Lamarque, *Opacity of Narrative*, esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹⁷ William C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative: An Introduction to 'Temps et Récit'* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 88.

¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Time', *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 178.



The second issue is the contrast between past-oriented and future-oriented narratives. You say: 'What narrative [that is, your narrative theory] offers [...] is an orientation as much to the future as to the past.' That, I recognize, is an important aspect of the theory. It captures the thought that a building's identity is not fixed at some arbitrary point of time (for example, the present) but is open to change and development in the future. That is surely a commendable implication. Then the crucial question for the practising conservator is: what future narratives are to be brought to reality (that is, implemented)? I do not yet see how an appeal to narrative in itself can answer that question, or shed light on what are surely essentially the same questions: What should we do now? What is it permissible or advisable to do now? That is just my earlier concern again: how narratives can constrain conservation decisions.

NW: Before responding to the central issue of constraint, a few words on the third issue raised earlier about the perspectival nature of competing narratives, which is central for the conservation process. Thomas Hardy, who before his literary career worked as an architect on church restorations, saw just this battle played out with respect to change to historic churches: 'To the incumbent the church is a workshop; to the antiquary it is a relic. To the parish it is a utility; to the outsider a luxury. How to unite these incompatibles?'¹⁹ MacIntyre addresses the broader issue of how competing rationalities can speak to one another at all, and which should win out, suggesting that one possible answer 'was supplied by Dante: that narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.'²⁰

PL: The problem of alternative or competing narratives does indeed relate to crucial questions for conservation practice – basically what it is permissible or desirable to do – but potentially seems to pose a major threat to the explanatory effectiveness of the narrative theory.²¹ The case of historic churches highlights the problem par excellence. Think of the competing narratives in the history of the Church. The destruction of the monasteries in England in the sixteenth

¹⁹ Thomas Hardy, 'Memories of Church Restoration', in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences*, ed. Harold Orel (1906; London: Macmillan, 1967), 204.

²⁰ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 81.

²¹ Some similar worries, both about competing narratives and the effectiveness of narrative accounts of value (for example, questioning evaluative standards brought to bear on narratives), are well articulated in Katie McShane, 'Some Challenges for Narrative Accounts of Value', *Ethics and the Environment* 17 (2012): 45–69.

century was driven by a narrative about their nature and role in local communities: for the reformers they were places of decadence, corruption, superstition, idolatry, and of course popery; they spread false ideas and fostered sinfulness and extravagance. They needed to be destroyed and their practices banned. For the monks and local communities a quite different narrative prevailed. The monasteries, they believed, were divinely sanctioned institutions fulfilling vital spiritual and secular roles: praying for the souls of benefactors and local people, maintaining the true faith, providing employment and housing in local communities, and acting as centres of worship and inspiration. These of course were past-oriented narratives but they invited radically different future-directed narratives. In this case the reformers won, not obviously because they had a better or more accurate narrative but because their narrative was grounded in power politics quite remote from ordinary people.

One might imagine parallel forces at work in modern-day decisions about church repair and building function. As attendance at a historic church dwindles and attitudes towards worship change, competing narratives, both past- and future-oriented, might develop. For the atheistically inclined the church has always been a place of superstition and suspect ritual (recall the opening stanzas of Philip Larkin's 'Church Going'); their narrative is largely negative and their future narratives might propose radical changes of use, to a café, perhaps, or village hall. To devout members of the congregation a different narrative, more positive, is foremost, centred on spirituality, worship, the liturgy, hallowed ground. To deconsecrate the building would be to destroy all they hold dear. The question for the narrative theorist is simple: how can these competing narratives be the basis for a decision about practical action? Talking in terms of narrative doesn't seem to solve the problems, but rather restates familiar problems in a different idiom.

NW: Certainly we can agree that there will always be competing narratives about anything people regard as important, including change to historic buildings. However, while narrative cannot be determinative for present decision-making, it does serve to challenge the reduction of a historic building to technology, or sociology, or – the basis of the current system – art history.

Let us consider an example: the Church of St Nicholas, Great Wilbraham, near Cambridge (fig. 1), a building of medieval origin with substantial Victorian alterations. Like the majority of parish churches it is under statutory protection (it is Grade II* listed) and my practice has recently completed a relatively modest alteration project at the west end. The scheme included a WC and a kitchen in the base of the tower, a new open gallery above for bell-ringers with a stair up to it from the nave, and the limited removal of (very ordinary) pews to create



Figure 1: Church of St Nicholas, Great Wilbraham, England; west end. Photo: Nigel Walter

a gathering space at the rear of the nave. Against the preference of some of the statutory consultees, the gallery projects forward of the base of the tower.

The changes are unmistakably of their age, with a glass balustrade to the gallery and modern detailing to the oak of the staircase and partitions. In narrative terms, the works comprise a distinct chapter in a story that goes back centuries, but one that works with the grain of the story to date. Practically, the changes enable the building to host more events (catering included), with the aim of bringing broader community uses back into the building, thus reincorporating an earlier understanding of what church buildings could be used for. There are clear signs of an earlier ringing floor and/or gallery, and the new gallery can also be read as a variation on the rood loft that most medieval churches once had at the chancel arch; it restores a degree of theatricality to the building, allowing for the positioning of musicians or readers there. This figurative reincorporation was matched by the literal reincorporation of a late medieval screen, probably of domestic origin, elsewhere in the building. In these ways, I would argue, the significance of the building is *enhanced*, as indeed is its

character:²² the west end, previously a mix of ad hoc partitions and messy storage, now has a positive identity.

In one sense the scheme at Great Wilbraham is unremarkable, merely reflecting aspects of good practice in architecture. If so, the point is that the proposed theoretical approach makes sense of that good practice. Rather than being allowable only in exceptional circumstances, change is normalized; the narrative is understood to be ongoing, and so we should expect the story to continue developing.

Recall the three key aspects of the narrative theory I alluded to earlier: that it accounts for continuity across time; that framing a historic building as mid-narrative allows for future cultural production; and that it allows a voice for (and ownership by) the community, not just the individual specialist. These three can be wrapped up in a fourth claim: that narrative offers a means of accounting for the whole as more than a collection of parts. These four criteria offer a benchmark for a theory that can address the particular concerns that bring me into this discussion, and against which the current system conspicuously falls short.

PL: The Great Wilbraham example nicely clarifies the way that creative innovations can harmonize with tradition and also illustrates how narrative descriptions of the innovations can both explain and justify the changes wrought. This provides a useful focus for our debate. But the nagging question remains of how far *narrative* is doing any hard explanatory work here. Even your four benchmark points might seem only loosely connected with narrative.

For example, how far does the (admittedly important) conception of 'continuity across time' as applied to historic buildings rely on narrative? The complex narratives of medieval churches from their origin to the present might suggest discontinuities as much as continuity. They have likely undergone massive changes, not least through the turbulence of the Reformation, in their function, in acts of worship, in internal decoration, in wear and tear or wanton damage, and in misplaced 'restoration'. There is no doubt a story to be told (that is, a narrative) that gives context to these changes. But isn't there a deeper question concerning what such a narrative is *about*? What is it that makes this a narrative about one and the same *entity*? Arguably, because it is a building we are talking

²² The idea of 'character', in particular aesthetic character, has been invoked in environmental conservation. Emily Brady, speaking of 'aesthetic integrity', says that it 'treats aesthetic features as parts of an integrated whole which constitutes the aesthetic character of an environment. It requires that we be true to that character, which means maintaining its soundness while being faithful to its narrative.' The appeal to narrative here also has clear resonances with that proposed in architectural conservation. See Emily Brady, 'Aesthetic Character and Aesthetic Integrity in Environmental Conservation', *Environmental Ethics* 24 (2002): 75–91.

about, of more fundamental importance than the continuing narrative are the very bricks and mortar that make it the building it is. Isn't it this enduring physical reality that grounds continuity across time? No doubt the suggestion raises issues relating to the Ship of Theseus, which retains its identity even through the gradual, wholesale replacement of physical parts.²³ But even in this classical conundrum it seems as if continuing identity rests more on function than on narrative. Again, the case for giving narrative explanatory priority needs to be made.

Your benchmarking criteria raise similar questions. The need to allow for 'future cultural production', rather than ossifying a building at an arbitrary point in its history, has already been acknowledged as important. But the point returns, about how appealing to narratives (past or future) can guide or constrain future developments. That local communities should have a voice in such decisions seems eminently commendable but there is a danger that the multiple narratives and perspectives brought by individuals or groups in the community will only increase the difficulty of knowing how best to proceed. Perhaps this just mirrors familiar problems of democratic decision-making. But it is not obvious that appealing to narratives is going to lessen those problems. Finally, the idea that narrative accommodates the whole as more than a collection of parts perhaps takes us back to Theseus' Ship. What makes it the *same* ship at the beginning and end of its journey? Likewise, what makes this the same building (or, more neutrally, the same entity) as the enduring subject of the multiple narratives? Is it an identity *given* by the narratives or is it an identity *presupposed* by the narratives?

NW: To respond on the specific point of Theseus' Ship, this has been used in heritage studies to explore the question of authenticity (a key issue for twentieth century conservation), and specifically to challenge the once-dominant belief that the authenticity of historic buildings lies exclusively in the preservation of their physical fabric. I note that Plutarch himself explains that 'this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of *things that grow*';²⁵ the partial answer to your question of what makes it the *same* building is that the narrative approach sees the building as just such a 'thing that grows'.

In addressing the concerns raised, I would like to step back and refine some of the claims made regarding the explanatory usefulness of narrative, and then to

²³ Pertinent questions about the enduring identity of buildings through change are raised in Wicks, 'Architectural Restoration'.

²⁴ David Lowenthal, 'Criteria of Authenticity', in *Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention: Preparatory Workshop*, ed. K. E. Larsen and N. Marstein (Oslo: Tapir, 1994), 40–41.

²⁵ Plutarch, *Theseus*, trans. John Dryden, *Internet Classics Archive*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/theseus.html>, emphasis added.

return briefly to the issue of how narrative can inform what we should do now, that is, how narrative can be said to constrain conservation decisions. In doing so, let us consider the commonplace example of whether pews should be removed from a church building; one recent and high-profile example is Bath Abbey, in England,²⁶ but the argument is repeated time after time.

The issue typically arises when a church congregation wishes to make more flexible use of their building, often including reintroducing community uses, and there are commonly two broad forms of objection. The first, more frequently articulated by those who are *not* regular users of the building, relates to change seen as a threat; this often belies an unexamined understanding that the typical nineteenth-century interior filled with bench pews is 'natural' and that 'it's always been like this'. In this context, a narrative approach sees the widespread Victorian pewing as but one chapter in an evolving story and, depending on the direction that narrative is given, arguably an unhelpful one. While these objections are important and heartfelt, often relating to personal connections with a building ('my aunt sat in that pew all her life...'), they should not wield a veto.

A second form of objection restricts the discussion to the aesthetic and historical. Like the ubiquitous IKEA flat pack, many sets of church pews were ordered from a catalogue and assembled on site. These are rarely of great aesthetic merit in themselves, in which case the argument is often made that it is the effect of the whole installation that is of importance. Equally, some pews were designed individually for the church in question, and may be very finely carved, as at Bath Abbey; others pre-date the Victorian period and, being older survivals, may have more historic interest. But neither beauty nor historic interest need be decisive. A narrative approach with its forward facing orientation – where does the story go next? – facilitates the assessment of those aesthetic and historical claims in the more flexible context of the narrative as a whole, in this case the context of the ongoing life of the worshipping community in that place and the performative (as opposed to aesthetic or functional) role of the building in that life. Neither the present need nor the claims of aesthetics or history – caricatured respectively as 'all change' and 'no change' – should go unchallenged; in arbitrating such competing claims, a narrative approach asserts the importance of the cultural and temporal context, alongside the physical.

²⁶ Timothy Briden, 'Re: The Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, Bath (Bath Abbey)', 18 December 2017, *Ecclesiastical Law Association*, <https://www.ecclesiastical-lawassociation.org.uk/judgments/reordering/bathabbey2017eccb&w1.pdf>.

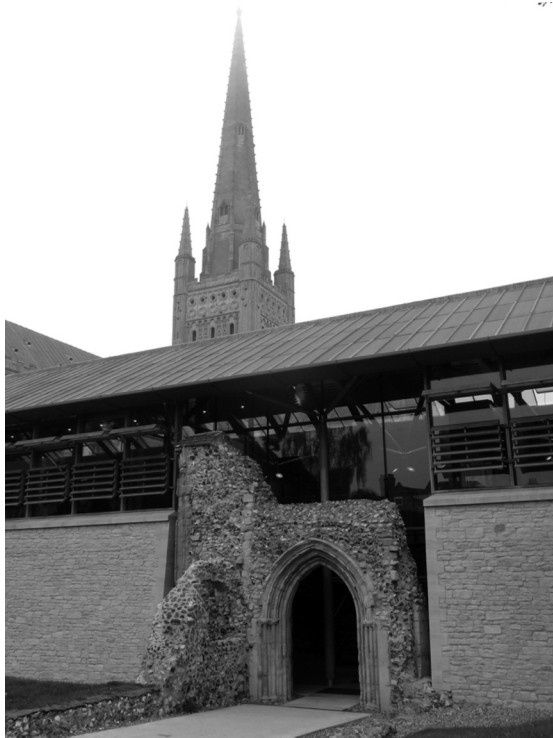


Figure 2: Norwich Cathedral Hostry, entrance (Hopkins Architects). Photo: Nigel Walter

To clarify, the appeal is not principally to the narratives that will be told in a specific case, important as it will be to listen to those. Rather, it is at the more fundamental level of the framing metaphor that I have found a narrative approach to be particularly powerful. Here it stands as an alternative and a challenge to the standard way in which such buildings are framed as precious artworks, themselves *sanctified* by age (Ruskin, et al.), and which we have an absolute moral duty to pass on to future generations in as unaltered a state as possible.

A narrative theory offers a hook on which a specific developmental story can be hung. As a sense-making framework it acknowledges that living buildings functioning in a community have branching futures; it is as simple as saying that we shouldn't stop now. Narrative is never going to prescribe the extent or nature of future development; doing that still requires imagination and creativity. What narrative does is to clear the space for that creativity, by insisting that most buildings are mid-narrative, that there is always a further chapter to be written. Here I come back to an earlier distinction, between living buildings which continue in use, and those whose narrative is generally judged to have finished,

such as Stonehenge. In the latter case, preservation comes to the fore, since these are monuments which are no longer living; but even here, the place of Stonehenge in the cultural landscape continues to change, and there are competing claims on its use. The narrative approach is flexible enough to accommodate the historic monument as a narrative that has reached its conclusion, while still allowing for the restarting of the narrative at a later time, as when a new building is inserted into a historic ruin (for example, Norwich Cathedral Hostry, fig. 2). As a framing metaphor, a narrative approach asserts that most historic buildings are living, and if living they should, for their ongoing health, continue to change. Change is part of their nature and to obstruct that change is to do violence to them.

But what of the question of constraint? Clearly not all change is good, and how are we to recognize good change when we see it? In the premodern world, it was the role of tradition to provide boundedness to the fluidity of creativity, and to enable us to recognize 'good' writing/building/parenting and so forth. The medieval buildings with which I work are examples of objects of that understanding of tradition that continue in use. Virtue ethics, with its focus on practices, narrative and tradition, appears to offer a better fit as a model for conservation – itself a form of applied ethics – than the modern alternatives built on duty or the consequences of our actions.²⁷ At the same time, Gadamer saw tradition as essential to understanding, enabling the dialogue with the past that is the essence of hermeneutics, and which is as applicable to historic buildings as to texts.²⁸ Both ideas challenge one of the central assumptions of modernity – that tradition must be overcome in the name of progress.

This in turn raises the question of creativity – of considerable interest to architects – which Romanticism understood to be the province of the individual genius. Much argument against change to historic buildings is couched in terms equivalent to the 'Great Man Theory' of history: the Gilbert Scott chancel, the Comper reredos, and so forth. Such highlights of the narrative may indeed be of such importance as to justify definitively shaping the remainder of the story, but such a case must be argued from the whole of the narrative, not assumed in advance.

²⁷ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985), 204–25. For a useful survey of the role of ethical considerations in preservation, including a discussion of narrative approaches, see Erich Hatala Matthes, 'The Ethics of Historic Preservation', *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2016): 786–94.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291.

PL: This is helpful in identifying the broader framework of the narrative theory and in laying down some markers for how narrative can constrain decision-making in particular contexts. It also opens up interesting new lines of thought. One of the key lessons from what you have just said highlights at least the negative aspect of appeal to narrative: the way it challenges simple or formulaic responses to development planning. The 'should-we-remove-the-pews?' example illustrates this well. Such a proposal, as you point out, might be met by, as it were, stock responses, sometimes from those who have no close association with the building itself or the community of users: 'Don't change anything!' or 'Make the change regardless!' The emphasis on narrative, with the idea of a 'living' building in mid-narrative, allows for a more nuanced and flexible approach. The line now is: Let's consider where this is heading and where we have come from. To the extent that this is more open-minded, less dogmatic, allowing 'space for creativity', it would seem eminently sensible as a pragmatic way of proceeding, even if it doesn't in itself provide determinative guidance on actual decision-making.

This pragmatic approach is evident in your discussion of tradition and creativity. Too strong an appeal to tradition in development planning for ancient buildings is in danger of taking us back to those stock responses, which the narrative theory seeks to counter. Tradition – in its simplest sense of 'the way things have been done in the past' – might indeed, as you say, 'provide a boundedness to the fluidity of creativity' but it could also put a block on creativity altogether. So, on the narrative account, the weight given to tradition must also be up for debate rather than settled for all time.

Speaking of creativity, you give examples of Romantic-type references to individual creative geniuses (in church design or decoration) whose works, according to the account you challenge, should not be altered. That kind of creativity is very different from the creativity desired by those who seek to override stock responses to development planning. The latter species of creativity, unlike the former, might seem in tension with tradition. Interestingly, in both senses 'creativity' has strongly positive connotations. Who could be against it? This is where tensions between narratives are likely to resurface. To have creativity as central to your narrative is always likely to be a mark in its favour. So once again a balance is needed between the narrative that says 'Don't tamper with the work of creative geniuses' and the narrative that says 'Let's be creative in our forward planning'.

NW: It may seem counterintuitive, but I see tradition and creativity as entirely compatible. Medieval art and architecture are full of creativity, yet were formed working within a tradition.

The argument from narrative is, in the terms you use, 'negative'; it cannot be determinative in the individual case, such as Great Wilbraham, or provide positive prescriptive guidance on actual decision-making. But it does assert that working with the grain of the story to date is essential, and that we should not be afraid of judicious editing, letting some things go as we continue to move the story forward. And this scheme illustrates the need to respond to the creativity of the past in dialogue with it – a point from Gadamer – rather than mimicking the architectural language of previous 'chapters'. In that sense, the narrative approach for which I am arguing echoes what Thomas Babington Macaulay famously said of 1830s Reform: 'It is now time for us to pay a decent, a rational, a manly reverence to our ancestors, not by superstitiously adhering to what they, in other circumstances, did, but by doing what they, in our circumstances, would have done.'²⁹

PL: I wonder if it might be helpful now to take stock of where we have got to and see what conclusions might be drawn, and what disagreements, if any, remain. We began with my expressing reservations about appeals to narrative in other contexts, notably the context of explaining personal identity and the sense of self. The question was whether such reservations would impact on your own appeal to narrative in the rather different context of development work on historic churches. Well, let me say that you have entirely persuaded me that simply relocating my scepticism about narrative into this new context would be unjustified. Perhaps I have not been talked out of my scepticism in other contexts but I realize that a more nuanced approach is needed here.

Several points have persuaded me that no principled or wholesale rejection of an appeal to narrative would be tenable in connection with the work you do with churches. One point that is persuasive is your emphasis on the metaphor of churches as 'living buildings'. The contrast you draw is with, for example, historically significant ruins that invite preservation as ruins but not further reconstruction, restoration or development. What is the connection with narrative? It comes in the idea of an ongoing story, an as yet incomplete story about a building with a future as well as a past. The churches which concern you are, as you put it, in mid-narrative. We don't know how the story will end. That simple appeal to narrative is effective.

A second point which draws on the metaphor of the living building is that the idea of narrative helps to clear 'the space for creativity' in decisions about the next part of the story. Historical narratives are open-ended to the extent that

²⁹ Parl. Deb. (3rd Ser.) (1831) 1196.

how the story continues is not fully determined by what has come before. The appeal to narrative is a salutary reminder of this open-endedness and thus challenges the thought that there is always only one way to proceed.

A third consideration expands on the second by insisting on 'community involvement' in decisions about new developments (as described in the Great Wilbraham example). Again, because there are different ways in which a building's narrative could be continued, it invites recognition of the possibility of multiple narratives, perhaps reflecting multiple interests or points of view. The narratives of the people who use the building or have it in their community are often ignored yet they represent a significant perspective. Of course, we should not limit this multiplicity to future-directed narratives; there will be competing narratives about the past too, emphasizing different perspectives, different assignments of significance, even different values. Listening to different voices can hardly be a fault. In effect I take it that in embracing multiple and competing narratives about buildings, indeed presenting this as a strength rather than weakness of your account, you have taken the sting out of the objection I initially raised that having too many narratives will compromise the effectiveness of any appeal to narrative. Multiple narratives are just what would be expected when different points of view are in play. Those who insist on simple or dogmatic solutions ignore this crucial fact.

Your fourth point in justifying the appeal to narrative is that it challenges other paradigms of building conservation or development, not least those that insist there is just the one correct answer, like Ruskin's 'Leave it alone' prescription. The narrative view, drawing on the first three points, has an agreeable flexibility to it, stressing open-mindedness in consort with the open-endedness of narrative itself.

These points undoubtedly provide both substance and *prima facie* attractiveness to the model of narrative you suggest. However, there are one or two factors which might seem not to be entirely resolved. One is in the question I have been persistently posing – namely, what constraints on decision-making might an appeal to narrative afford? Why should thinking in terms of narratives make any difference? Your general answer, that adducing narrative is not suddenly going to make the decisions easier or even more determinate, is entirely reasonable. Decisions about what is desirable or permissible in bringing about changes in historic churches can be difficult and fraught with competing interests. I take it your thought is that redescribing (or partially redescribing) the debates in terms of how competing narratives about a living building should be assessed (reflecting on its past and its future) provides a more congenial context than simply weighing the merits of (largely inflexible)



conservation principles. And that does seem convincing – in effect thinking of narrative as a useful heuristic (what you call a ‘framing metaphor’) – even if at crucial points in the decision-making process the idea of narrative, as I suggested earlier, might cease to be a central focus and even turn out not to be explanatorily ineliminable.

Another constant worry with narrative, which again we have debated, is the danger of distortion, unreliability, and misplaced emphasis in narrative. This worry arises whenever narrative comes up. The specific danger in this context is that distorted narratives might have undue influence on important decisions. We need to remind ourselves that the power of a narrative to persuade can often rely on manipulative rhetoric rather than reasoned argument, as, again, speculative property developers can well illustrate. I believe the idea of distorted narratives is particularly pressing in other applications, including discussions of the self or self-identity, where self-deception is a constant danger. Perhaps, though, it is less problematic in the context with which you are concerned. Where difficult decisions are made and different points of view are salient then the dangers of distortion or exaggeration are going to arise anyway, whatever form the disagreements take, whether involving narrative or appeal to strict principles or pre-determined values. I suppose, however, that if that point is stressed then, again, it might seem that narrative is not helping much. It is not solving a problem, just reflecting a problem. But then the earlier, positive points seem to lessen worries on that score.

Finally, I think it is important to bear in mind what might be called the semantics of narrative, involving some of the points I made earlier. For example, I think it can be confusing to speak of buildings, even metaphorically, as if they themselves *are* narratives. Strictly speaking, they are not narratives so much as the subjects of narratives. Narratives need to be narrated. That is a constraint on them. When we say colloquially ‘That building has a story to tell’ what we mean literally is ‘Stories could be told about that building’. Someone has to tell a story for it to be a story. I accept that it can be fairly innocuous to anthropomorphize buildings and speak of them as ‘living’ or as having a character or personality to be revealed. But I fear it might weaken the narrative account if the paradigm of a narrative is taken to be something like the biography of a person, revealing an inner nature or soul. That can make its application to buildings seem contentious. Admittedly, as you rightly point out, the idea of narrative brings with it the idea of unity or coherence or connectedness so that to speak of the narrative of a building is to speak of more than just a set of isolated incidents in the building’s history: narrative offers, as you say, a unified whole that is more than the sum of its parts. That has no anthropomorphic implications.



One more final proviso might be needed, one that I have emphasized elsewhere in talking of narratives in relation to the self – namely, that narratives are seldom (if ever) complete, far less comprehensive.³⁰ Most real narratives that involve persons – and surely buildings too – are in fact just mini-narratives or snippets of event-based descriptions. That can make actual narratives rather less exciting or explanatorily weighty than they might seem in abstract. This is my scepticism mildly resurfacing!

NW: Thank you for that, which seems a very fair (and gracious) summary. As you suggest, the question of the living status of the church buildings with which I work is central to how I believe we should approach them; this, as I see it, is the key point of difference with those who choose to oppose change, such as the Victorian Society in the recent case of pew removal at Bath Abbey. For me, narrative is the best theoretical fit for the practical issues that follow.

We differ on the validity of the claim that buildings can themselves be read *as* narratives, rather than merely something about which narratives can helpfully be told. Architects cheerfully talk about listening to a building and hearing it speak, and I am persuaded of the agency of buildings more generally, particularly in community formation. But as you suggest, this anthropomorphic turn is not essential to the bones of our discussion; perhaps this is something to explore in a subsequent collaboration.

This discussion has been helpful in testing, sifting, and refining the narrative approach I am pursuing, and I am very encouraged that, at least in this context, you can see some merit in it. While I think I retain a greater tolerance for the claims made for narrative in the broader context of personal identity, I in turn have been persuaded by aspects of your scepticism. In both contexts, I see the relevance of narrative as a useful sense-making mechanism; however, I agree that claims that narrative of itself can be determinative are dangerous, as much to the care of our built heritage as to our personal mental health.

Peter Lamarque

Department of Philosophy, University of York,
Heslington, York YO10 5DD, United Kingdom
p.v.lamarque@york.ac.uk

Nigel Walter

Department of Archaeology, University of York,
King's Manor, York YO1 7EP, United Kingdom
nhw502@york.ac.uk

³⁰ See Lamarque, *Opacity of Narrative*, esp. chap. 3.



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