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Building Authenticity

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AUTHENTIC?

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I went to Disney World a couple of weeks ago. I can't say it was unbridled fun, what with humid heat, massive crowds, long lines, and three small children to entertain, but it had its moments. One remarkable feeling came over me when we walked into the "Africa" section of the Animal Kingdom, a relatively new theme-park zoo. Crossing a bridge, I was surrounded by buildings that matched perfectly everything I expected of Africa. The name of a store, painted on the stucco side of the building, was chipping and imperfect. A beaten-up British post office pillar box stood awaiting non-existent mail. There were even fake electrical wires hanging from the side of a building, supposed evidence of a crumbling infrastructure. "The only things missing are some emaciated children and Ebola warnings," I remarked to my wife. I didn't know whether to be enthralled at the skill of the magic, being transported to a place that played to my stereotypes, or disgusted at the Americanized vision of Africa.

Pubs and beer bars, so significant to the experience of a beer drinker, trigger similar feelings. I grew into beer geekdom while living in England, and I was treated to a range of pubs that offered the feeling—and the reality—of a special quality: authenticity. One can find a definition of authenticity in a dictionary, but to do so is pointless. Authenticity is an emotion not captured by any rendering of it; indeed, to create authenticity is nearly a contradiction in terms. The richness of the built environment comes from the organic dimension of life—places that become what they are through time and slow change, not merely the manipulation of forms, styles, and furniture. The effect of an authentic experience is profound: it envelops you with a sense of place, enlivens your emotions while anaesthetizing your conscious senses, and heck, it even makes the beer taste better. No Disney designers could ever replicate the feeling produced by The Wharf, an early 19th century building now sitting in an island in Oxford's inner ring road near the police station, whose uneven wood planks, decrepit single room, and weathered honey stone hits you as hard as the eyes of its menagerie of locals, who stare and murmur as a foreigner strides up to the eccentric

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publican for a well-kept pint. (Curiously, I could also choose a bottle of Girardin Gueuze.) Unfortunately England has a large and growing number of corporate-built pubs, offering the semblance of the experience without the pedigree, but around every corner you can still find the locals with decades, if not centuries, of life breathing through them.

Finding an authentic pub in the USA is more difficult. When I moved to Texas I immediately sought out some friendly venues in which to sit, drink a beer, and maybe read a book—I had had much success reading and writing in the pubs of Oxford. One of the first places I tried was an outlet The Fox and Hound, part of the “Fox and Hound Restaurant Group”. The glowing sign outside pronounces its claim to be an “English Pub and Grille”. In retrospect I’m surprised it didn’t say “Ye old”. In a strip mall, with 30 foot warehouse-style ceilings, a dozen televisions tuned to ESPN, and seating for several hundred, it did nothing to soothe my senses. Rather, it attacked them, from the shine on the veneer wood to the noise of the speaker system to the wafting smell of the \$7.49 quesadillas appetizer. Nor is there a sense of place: it might have been the Texas location, or the Tennessee location, or Michigan or Pennsylvania or wherever. Like Disney’s German buildings outside the “It’s a Small World” ride, it had enough detail to suggest its style, but not enough to be concrete. It’s aesthetically slippery. It may be a fine venue to watch a game with friends, perhaps even drink (that day they had New Belgium’s 1554 on tap, perfectly respectable), but what did the application of a few English motifs offer? Not much.

The problem for America and American beer-drinkers, of course, is time, or rather the lack of it. Dallas, Texas is a thoroughly modern city. Dallas remained empty prairie for decades after The Wharf was built, and most everything that was built before 1950 already has been torn down under an ideology of growth, conspicuous wealth, and “improvement”. Precious little is valued for being old, much less decaying. Dallasites possess an aesthetic sensibility born of Prada and Hollywood. Indeed, last week the New York Times published a piece about the homes as large as 45,000 square feet built in an exclusive neighborhood ten minutes from Rodeo Drive. Joyce Arad, wife of a Hollywood producer, commented her on 2003 house built in the style of 18th century France, “I wanted it to be homey and authentic-feeling.” Uh, authentic French with a media center. Too many try to manufacture and buy authenticity, but it doesn’t come from a machine or the desk of a Los Angeles designer.

It takes a human element, the organic, and the serendipitous, woven together with time. The most impressive place I’ve been lately was the Brick Store Pub in Decatur, Georgia. I was staying at a hotel in upscale Buckhead—I could have been in Dallas from its mix of buildings and stores, playgrounds for the upwardly mobile—and was looking to try some local beers. An easy metro ride to the east side of Atlanta, the Brick Store sits on the courthouse square, looking slightly forlorn but at home among a block of interesting restaurants and shops. I fought off the temptation of the museum in the county courthouse, instead walking in past the tables to take a seat at the U-shaped bar. The music in my ears wasn’t your standard Muzak or even alternative radio, but selections from CDs brought in by the staff. For beer, I wasn’t disappointed, a pint of Terrapin’s Coffee Oatmeal Imperial Stout suited me just fine on this crisp day in January. Other local offerings followed, and the women serving the bar obliged me in some samples from their Belgian list. Just as pleasing was the food, for me smoked turkey with avocado on a challah bun, and a side salad with a feta cheese dressing and

sultanas. Satisfying though not gourmet, you could tell by the uneven slice on the bun that a live person had touched it. The prices were extraordinarily reasonable. I thought, “this is a quality destination for Atlanta”. It was a renaissance, as much for me as it must have been for Atlantans when a couple of years ago Georgia altered its alcohol laws to allow beers above 6% abv.

My appreciation of the place deepened when I met Dave Blanchard, the owner, around the bar. He had me follow him up the stairs to the Brick Store’s balcony seating area and then he ushered me one more step up, into the space above the next-door café. It was a room of great warmth. A bit of claustrophobia set in with ceiling clearances that can’t be greater than 6.5 feet. But that puts you at eye-level with a full collection of glassware hanging, ready for use. Everywhere I looked, there were rich materials to enjoy. The bar was of textured concrete with inlaid wood, eight taps jutting from it made of rough pipes, inspired by a North Carolina tapas bar he knew. The decorative objects weren’t run-of-the-mill: a Westvleteren wood box is a rare find, as are Rochefort bottles with molded glass. My favorite feature was the side wall made of old doors, salvaged and collectively forming a quilt of wood, including one door from a morgue with separate smaller doors where the drawers would have been. There are no TVs, of course, though there are some concessions were necessary, such as the gray and nicely unobtrusive insulation above the wood beams. The double cooler of Belgian beers behind bar certain merits some attention, but that’s like saying it’s the pint of bitter than makes a 17th century British pub great. No—heresy—it isn’t. It’s the space. A great space makes the beer legendary because it brings people together to make a beer experience.

Has Dave thus solved the riddle of the American pub, building authenticity in a new space, using his own two hands? Perhaps. In a world where “new” often means “manufactured,” he has created a magical space through his vision, resourcefulness, and sweat. With the exception of some random antiques over the front entranceway, nothing in the pub looks “too cute” or “magazine perfect,” only inviting and honest. The aesthetic of the space stretches from the floorboards to the ceiling beams, not from a few neon beer signs, and this pub cannot be copied at dozens of locations with a blueprint. Still, every owner needs two ingredients that are not his to supply: time and people. The Brick Store has a good jump on time, having inherited from history the gorgeous red brick building on a classic American town square. Yet, those doors on the wall still tell someone else’s story more than this pub’s, and I only barely restrained an instinct to spill a beer on the bar in an attempt to leave some kind of stain. But that will come as customers visit through the years. And then, when people see it years from now, you’ll know that the rough edges weren’t supplied by a Disney designer’s paint brush but by a community, perhaps stretching across the generations, which has shared a space in common celebration of real life.

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