

Do people really want authenticity: Exploring ideas of authenticity and storytelling in designed objects and environments

‘Authentic’ is Merriam-Webster’s word of the year for 2023 (Webster, 2023), and in this essay I explore what this concept means for design. I choose examples mainly from leisure environments and historical attractions (and their contained objects) as in these places users are particularly mindful of issues concerning authenticity. However, the ideas I explore could easily be applied to any field connected to architecture, interior design, product design and curation. I identify a close connection between authenticity and storytelling and examine the impact of true and false narratives on visitor experiences.

Authenticity is something we supposedly all seek, yet struggle to define. Officially, authenticity equates to verisimilitude, or truth – a concept human beings have grappled with for all existence. In the 21st century however, its meaning is somewhat more complex. The terms recent popularity has been attributed to debates about artificial intelligence, social media and the idea of ‘the authentic self’- expressed in part by consuming goods and experiences. Authenticity is a construct that points towards what society values and is therefore a constantly shifting set of ideals, highlighting for example the importance of craftsmanship, authorship and history. (Boyle, 2004, p.xvii-; Thernell-Read et al, 2022, p.1-4) (figure 1)



Figure 1: Watercolour and Ink on Paper, by Helen Perry. Breaking apart the concept of authenticity based on the following texts; (Boyle, 2004; Pyne, 2019; Sherwood, 2022; Thernell-Read et al, 2022; York, 2014).

Contextualizing the term within the parameters of environments and objects, my personal definition is that something authentic is something with a sense of provenance- it has value beyond the sum of its parts. It means more than just honesty. However, authenticity isn’t possible without storytelling. Sharing myths and truths about the life of an object or place is essential. How will people know a certain object is painstakingly handmade by a certain author, or has a fascinating ancient history, unless a story is attached? These narratives engage our imaginations, and we feel it gives a piece of design more meaning. We might struggle to determine the authenticity or ‘truth’ of a story, but the story itself is enough to make us look at a piece of design more favourably. Therefore, I will argue that when people say they want authenticity, what they really want is a good story.

Historical provenance is an important aspect of authenticity, and historical narratives attached to places or objects make users feel they are experiencing something authentic (Thernall-Read et al, 2022, p.6-9; York, 2014, p.73, p.83-85). Therefore, when they visit a museum or historic building, users expect authenticity (Thernall-Read et al p.1-2). However, complete authenticity is impossible to achieve as items are being interpreted with a modern mind set, in a different time and place (Lowenthal in Barker et al, 1990 p.17). Old buildings and objects often must be restored for purposes of preservation or to reveal their original beauty, but restoration conflicts with authenticity because it modifies what exists. On extreme example is the Kings Apartments within Hampton Court Palace. These were partially destroyed by fire in 1986, so visitors experiencing these rooms after their re-opening in 1992 were viewing almost entirely new ceilings and interior fabrications (Smith, 1992). However, without restoration, there would be little to gain from a visit to this wing of the palace.

Historical objects that have sustained severe damage also often present a strong case for restoration, or even replication. This is because the objects original appearance can be represented in a way that is more true or 'authentic' to when it was first made or used (Lowenthal in Barker et al, 1990, p.19-22). Original artifacts, in an unrestored state, can be difficult for viewers to understand. For example, the Anglo-Saxon Helmet discovered at Sutton Hoo in 1939 was found as a collection of small, incomplete fragments. After hundreds of years of damage and decay, the helmets appearance bore little resemblance to its original form, making it difficult for casual viewers grasp the true significance of the object. The British Museum therefore reconstructed the helmet onto a metal plate (figure 2). This is

displayed adjacent to a replica (figure 3), which attempts to show the helmet in its former glory.



Figure 2: (Left) The restored Sutton Hoo Helmet as seen in the British Museum, showing only small fragments of the original

Figure 3: (Right) The replica of the Sutton Hoo Helmet as seen in the British Museum

(Both photographed by Helen Perry at The British Museum, London, 2022)

Although this replica helps the viewer understand the original, it could be argued that alone, replicas lack a certain 'aura'. This term was used by Walter Benjamin in his publication 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (Benjamin, 2010, p.14-16). This 'mist' is hard to define but is a sum of what is often lost in the act of replication- the objects meaning and history, held within the stories of the people it has encountered.

This concept is explored by researcher Jan Penrose in her paper *Authenticity, Authentication and Experiential Authenticity* (Penrose, 2020). This supports the idea that museum visitors do not seek predominantly image-based experiences, but something that touches them on a deeper, almost spiritual level. They want the magic of the originals, touched by the hands of the past. In her study on Anne Frank House, Penrose infers that visitors were motivated by the authenticity of the experience (figure 4). They were enthralled by stepping inside the genuine house, the articles on its walls, and of course the diary itself- upon which the

authenticity of the whole museum hangs (Penrose, 2020, p.1250).

In Anne Frank House, curators decided to leave rooms empty, allowing visitors to imagine the real items based on visual information they are given earlier in their visit (for example photos or models in the exhibition area). According to Penrose, this worked to such an extent that some visitors believed they had seen the unfurnished rooms with furniture in them. (Penrose, 2020, p.1261-1262) (Although arguably they may have been influenced by watching films or TV programmes about the Franks.) However, this still shows the power of allowing visitors to ‘imagine into’ interior spaces.

During Penrose’s study, Anne’s diary was briefly removed from the museums display case and replaced with a replica. The visitor book was inundated with posts expressing a deep sense of disappointment; showing how much value they place on authenticity. In some ways, the fixation on the ‘original’ is irrational, as it is structurally a simple object, and such low-level craftsmanship can easily be recreated. The viewers feelings towards the diary however, are based on its deep connection to Anne as person (Penrose, 2020, p.1254). It was a vessel for her consciousness which was physically very present in her every-day life. It tells, and authenticates, her personal story, the story of others in the house, and by extension the stories of millions of others. It is the aspect of the individual personality that visitors respond to so deeply. The connection between Anne and her diary mimics an artist and his painting. Or as art historian and Museum Director Mark Jones states in ‘Fake-The Art of Deception’ (Barker et al, 1990, p.15), the value of a painting or object is not created by its appearance, but by its connection with the hand that made it. The writer’s hand is much the same.

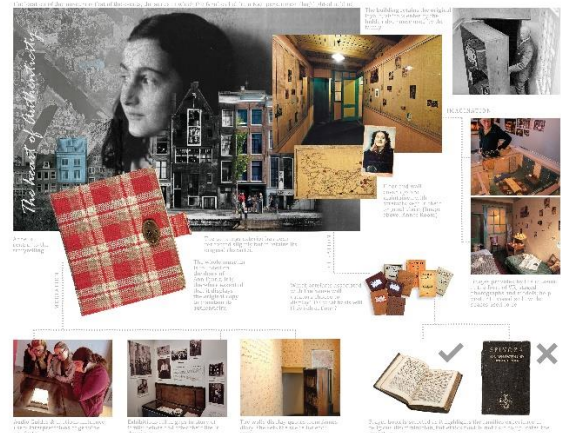


Figure 4: Collage and Diagram, Helen Perry, using materials from annefrank.org and google, and elaborating on ideas of Jan Penrose

Historical places and objects considered authentic are highly desirable, but they cannot be created. In places where there is a lack of history, as Umberto Eco pointed out: fakes thrive (Eco, 1986, p.26-28). For this reason, the USA provided a great research ground for writer Umberto Eco, during which he coined the term ‘Hyper-Reality’. Examples of this include ‘toy cities’ replicating historical or foreign places (often in Europe), wax museums and Theme Parks. Eco criticises the shallowness of these places as they tend to trivialise, oversimplify, or even remove meaning from the originals they depict (Eco, 1986, p.8-10, 16-19). One example not explored in the book, is that of ‘The Holy Land’ Theme Park in Florida (figure 5) which reduces the world-changing story of Jesus to a mere spectacle. The design of these very controlled environments can lead visitors to display very passive behaviour, taking on robotic or childlike personas. This leaves them susceptible to manipulation, such as to indulge in the mindless consumerism of Disney Parks centred around ‘fantasy’ shopping streets where the money is all too real (Eco 1986, p.39-58).

However, it is easy for a European author such as Eco to be derogatory about these shallow, geographically and historically ungrounded ‘fake’ places, when ‘the real thing’ (for example gothic architecture) is so easy for him to access (a point he does acknowledge). Hyper-real environments, nevertheless, do have their benefits. The non-site-specific nature of these environments means they can provide opportunities for those who are not able to travel, perhaps because of disability, family/work commitments, or financial constraints. A great example is Tropical Islands (figure 6) which brings the tropical beach experience to Northern Germany in the form of a domed holiday resort. Here, the offer of having a holiday with predictable weather, perfect surfing waves and no mosquitos seems like a tempting offer. They are safe, controlled, and predictable, designed for fun and providing leisure without mental or physical exertion.

I believe there is value in the all-embracing escapism of these hyper-real environments. Stressed and overwhelmed members of society could greatly benefit from turning off from reality for a day or two, uninterrupted by many of life’s complications. Furthermore, hyper-real leisure environments can be a place to bond with family and friends. Although as places they may not be authentic, the emotions and experiences of the visitors are. They may not be seen as a desirable, due to their lack of a historically or culturally significant back story, but they are places where visitors create memories and personal stories of their own.



Fig. 5: ‘The Holy Land’ Theme Park, USA. Photos: Dan Cronin. Kitsch has a strange ability to make the meaningful meaningless, as it warps reality into something idealistic and fundamentally untrue.



Fig. 6: ‘Tropical Islands’ Krausnick, Germany. Photograph by Frederik Seeler 2017. (Seeler, 2017) Fake environments offer new opportunities to those unable to travel. However one visitor said “Nobody can be truly happy here.”

Another approach to creating authenticity in a place without historical narratives, is to create fictional narratives. This may seem contradictory to its meaning as ‘truth’, but if the intention of the story is to entertain rather than to deceive, there is no reason they cannot work in harmony. The writer Alice Sherwood explains this through the example of the magician whose ‘open-lies’, consented to by the audience, makes him the personification of honesty (Sherwood, 2022, p.5-6). She states that ‘The opposite of illusion was not delusion, but illumination. You can get to the real by way of make-believe’ (Sherwood, 2022, p.11).

The staging of House Museums, or other historical buildings, for example, can present many problems in terms of authenticity. Even if all artifacts are available (which is rarely the case) the choice of objects and their positioning can lead to vastly different outcomes depending on curators’ priorities. For example, interiors may be staged to maximise design aesthetics, to recreate a certain time or event, or to express a resident’s personality. House-museums are inherently less factual than traditional museums, but this is part of their attraction. Visitors understand that falsification is inevitable but embrace the emotional aspect of the experience, which results from such an immersive and intimate environment.

House Museums can provide a sense of being transported to a different time and place. For example, Dennis Severs House in Spitalfields presents the story of a fictional family from the 18th to early 20th Century through a series of staged rooms within a single property (figure 7). They represent a rise and fall of circumstance which reflects that of the neighbourhood during certain periods. Each room is staged to present a specific point in time, as if the rooms inhabitant left just moments ago. Background noises, smells and half-eaten biscuits all contribute to the sense of

theatre. The sense of intrigue and mystery is the main attraction for visitors, and this is not diminished by the somewhat flimsy factual grounding.



Fig. 7: Room of Dennis Severs House (Spitalfields, London) staged at Christmas as part of ‘Silent Night’ event. Photographed by Roelof Bakker

The same could be said for any work of fiction, be it in the form of novels, films or theatre. An audience watching *Les Miserable* do not sit in judgment as actors portray characters and their invented narratives, attached loosely to a background thread resembling the 1832 Paris Rebellion. They do not dismiss it as lies, but fully embrace its unreality, using it as a wonderful means of escape. This concept can also be applied to objects, places and interior design. Fictional narratives being used to enrich design, and a great example is Grayson Perry’s House for Essex (figures 8-9). This piece of real-life architecture is a memorial to fictional Essex woman, Julie. It was created by Perry and FAT Architects, and features hand-crafted icons of Julie, portraying her as a modern goddess (Greyson Perry’s Dreamhouse, 2015).

Perry wanted people to celebrate an ordinary life and the joy of human relationships, rather than the capitalist view of a ‘successful person’. He approached this by forming an elaborate life story around the character of Julie. The house was said to be built by her widower to fulfil a promise to commemorate her life.

During his creative process, Perry began to realise that Julie's character was formed from memories and hopes relating to his own mother, converging to form a symbol of 'thwarted female intelligence' (Moore, 2015). Perry repeatedly referred to Julie's story throughout the projects' progression—even some of the workmen admitted to thinking of her as a real person. He also told the story to a group of 'real life Julies' who he toured around as part of a Channel 4 documentary. Although Perry was open about the fact Julie is fictional, it's clear the women relate to her strongly; when they saw the house they were visibly moved.

The 'House for Essex' manifests an inspirational yet 'average person' who shares in the struggles of 'real-life Julies'. They fill the gaps between fact and fiction with their own stories and experiences, making her more relatable than any living person could be. Through art and architecture, Julie became real. This process demonstrates how the merging of physical design and fictional storytelling can create a level of believability beyond the power of each separate medium, and can be used as a tool for designers to convey complex philosophical messages to the visitor.



Fig.8: Interior of 'A House for Essex', 2015, Grayson Perry and Charles Holland FAT Architects, Wrabness. This house is shrine to fictional Essex Woman, Julie. Tapestries and sculptures tell the story of her life. The house serves as a piece of art as well as a holiday rental.



Fig.9: The Exterior of 'A House for Essex' The chapel-like forms of this house reinforce its meaning a serious commemoration of a person's life, stirring 'real' emotion, rather than Kitsch (Moore, 2015). Individually-made tiles are amongst many handmade elements, and this investment in craftsmanship gives the work a sense of gravitas.

The friction between real and fake narratives can also create an interesting visitor experience as they pick apart complex layered meanings. For example, in 2005, Banksy created a piece of prehistoric cave art called 'Peckham Rock' – a doodle on a piece of concrete from Hackney. Banksy planted this object in the British Museum, alongside a realistic looking caption telling an amusing satirical storyline (figure 10) (Pyne, 2019, p.259-269). It lay disguised amongst the museum's collections for several days, making a stand against an institution that failed to embrace modern art. Although the Museum eventually removed the piece, it later reappeared legitimately in an exhibition of protest works called 'I Object'.

It is interesting how the museum's attitude to the object changed, and they embraced its comedy and message despite being the butt of the joke. The intermingling of the objects true and false narratives presents opposing perspectives about authenticity, and questions what deems an object worthy of display. 'Fakery has an uncanny ability to unsettle the cultural status quo and challenge how things are made real' (Pyne, 2019, p.118). Because the object

caption is not true, does it make the item inauthentic? One could argue that the outrageousness of the description means that it was never intended to be believed, and therefore fulfils Sherwood's criteria for audience compliance. Furthermore, this item leads me to question if historic 'fact' should be so strongly associated with authenticity.

Many historic stories are hard to verify due to inconclusive evidence; there is always an element of doubt, and of spin, on any interpretation of historic objects or places. Contemporary art, however, is authentic in the sense that it represents a particular person's true feelings or beliefs at a particular time. One person telling their own story is surely more authentic than a third party (such as a museum) attempting to tell the stories of multiple others that have long left this existence.



Fig. 10: Peckham Rock, 2005, Banksy. The British Museum. Graffiti artist Banksy placed this piece of 'prehistoric art' and official looking plaque amongst the collections of the British Museum.

In conclusion, this research shows that authenticity in objects and environments can present itself in many ways. I argue that the type of authenticity that people seek most however, is that of emotional connection. They embrace authentic objects and environments because it makes them feel closer to the human stories that are told through them. Buildings and objects that have lived a long, well-documented, celebrated lives, or are connected to specific people or events, are deemed to be more culturally significant, and so have a distinct advantage in the stakes of authenticity. However, contemporary or fictitious narratives can be applied to any piece of design, making it feel more authentic, and providing opportunities for escapism and entertainment. Stories invented by artists and designers represent a personal authenticity that viewers relate to. They are free from controversial debates about authentication, presenting deep personal truths that can be then interpreted in the context of society. There is sense of flexibility with which viewers can draw out their own meanings, and many embrace this opportunity for self-illumination. People care about authenticity because it encapsulates human experiences shared through stories, and these are just a few examples of the many opportunities that could arise from embracing storytelling in design.

Image List:

Figure 1: Authors Own, Diagram on Authenticity, Watercolour and Ink on paper

Figures 2 & 3: Authors Own, (2022) Photographs, The British Museum, London

Figure 4: Authors Own collage.

Figure 5: Cronin, D. (2015) Holy Land Experience. See the Bible in Real Life: Photos of Florida's Holy Land Theme Park. Atlas Obscura. Available: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/see-the-bible-in-real-life-photos-of-floridas-holy-land-themepark>. (Accessed: 1st December 2023)

Figure 6: Tanjong Corporation. (2004) Tropical Islands. Photographed by Frederik Seeler in 2017. Krausnick, Germany. Available: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/433q5j/i-spent-24-hours-in-the-worlds-largest-indoor-rainforest> Tropical Island (Accessed: 1st December 2023)

Figure 7: Roelof Bakker. (unknown) Room of Dennis Severs House (Spitalfields, London) at 'Silent Night' event.

Figure 8 & 9: FAT Architects; Perry, G; Holland, C. (2015) A House for Essex. Photography: Hobhouse, J. Available: <https://archello.com/project/a-house-for-essex> (Accessed 28 November 2023)

Figure 10: Banksy. (2005) Peckham Rock. Photographed by Banksy c/o Pest Control Office. The British Museum, London. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/may/16/ian-hisloppicks-banksy-hoax-for-british-museum-dissent-show> (Accessed: 28 November 2023)

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