

Anastasia Citsay

Professor Han

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Agent 1-Myself

The fabric I chose to construct my project around is that of Cape May, New Jersey. My congregation, residence, and conflict buildings are all integral historical pillars of the city of Cape May. This city remains a hugely popular shore attraction despite not modernizing in recent years. Cape May embraces its rich history and shows how historical towns can still be relevant in today's fast-paced world. The sense of nostalgia one gets while visiting is what draws in roughly 10 million visitors each year. My place of congregation, The Cape May Lighthouse, has attracted over 2.1 million people to climb to the top since it has been opened to the public. Although built in 1859 it is still fully operational today. Congress Hall, America's first seaside resort, is my place of residence. Although not a permanent home for anyone, it provides a place to reside while taking a break from today's fast-paced society. My place of conflict, Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church, is where numerous visitors from all over the world gather to worship, repent, or take a break from the strip mall right outside its doors.

The three agents I am choosing who experience my fabric in vastly different ways are myself, a priest at Our Lady Star of the Sea church, and a genuine tourist. Obviously, I am familiar with my own perspective and unfamiliar with the other two. I have a unique perspective on Cape May because I have lived thirty to forty minutes away from it for most of my life, so I'm not technically a local but I visit very often. This means I'm more familiar with it than the normal tourist but not as familiar as someone who lives in the town itself. I get to experience the city multiple times throughout the year in both the off-season and the busy summer months. This means I can appreciate its beauty without the burden of living in a place infested by tourists like a true local. I do not experience Cape May as an escape from reality or a true vacation, but rather as a fun and special extension of my home. Even so, it is impossible not to feel as if you are in a happy time-warp while walking the streets and visiting the historic structures.

The building I chose to represent the quality of congregation is the Cape May Lighthouse. Although not a large building, people are drawn in from all over to climb the 199 steps to the top and witness the stunning almost three hundred sixty degree view of the ocean from Cape May Point. The main point of congregation is the stairwell that leads to the lookout. Pre-coronavirus I would be part of a moving wall of tourists that were making their ways up and down the structure. The shaft of the

building is 26.5 inches thick at its thinnest point and 4 feet and 6.5 inches thick at its thickest. The entire structure was specifically engineered to withstand forces many times greater than hurricane-grade winds. Inside the stairwell are informational exhibits about the people who built the lighthouse, those who have worked there throughout the years, and the history of the Jersey Shore. This specific lighthouse was the third one to be built on Cape May Point, but it is the only one to remain standing and operational today, as the other two are currently under water. The area immediately surrounding the Cape May Lighthouse was turned into Cape May Point State Park in 1964. So when I visit the lighthouse I am sure to appreciate the beach and protected wetlands close by. This building gives me an undeniable sense of novelty every time I visit it. It is such a stereotypical symbol of a beach town that it would make even a local feel as if they were a tourist on vacation. It is still fully functional today, and is a stellar example of how useful history is viewed as “cute” and “kitschy” in today’s modern world, even if still useful. The lighthouse is used by the coast guard and the light that flashes every fifteen seconds has a range of 24 nautical miles, or 28 actual miles. Nothing screams “summer” like splashing around on the beach after climbing and descending almost two hundred stairs to the top of an old lighthouse.

My next condition of the fabric of Cape May is residence. I chose Congress Hall to represent this. Congress Hall is America’s first official seaside resort. It contains a hotel, four different restaurants, six shops, a spa, a fitness center, a lounge area with two pools, and a beautiful beach right across from the property. When first constructed in 1816, it was given the nickname “Tommy’s Folly” because locals believed that the owner, Thomas Hughes, was a fool for creating a resort so large in a small budding beach town. They were soon proven wrong when Hughes became a House Representative in congress and the resort became very successful. Multiple United States presidents have vacationed there, and Benjamin Harrison even made it his official Summer White House. The original structure burnt down in the great fire of 1878, but was soon re-erected in stone with the exact same appearance. When many Victorian hotels were demolished to make room for more modern resorts, Congress Hall was preserved and is now a high-end boutique hotel. It has a very different atmosphere from the bustling casinos of Atlantic City or the busy hotels and motels in Ocean City. Congress Hall is truly a place that makes visitors feel relaxed and like they can enjoy a slow-paced and peaceful beach vacation. I chose this as my place of residence because although nobody lives there permanently, it provides a temporary home for thousands of tourists and guests per year. I have never stayed in the hotel rooms, but Congress Hall is like an extension of my home because of the fact that we have Christmas-Day dinner here every year. My family and I also visit the indoor shops and dine at the various restaurants quite frequently in the warmer months. This place of residence is definitely meant to be enjoyed with friends and family.

Walking through the doors makes you feel like you have been transported to the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. I love the fact that I do not have to be a hotel guest to experience this. The location of Congress Hall is also integral to the historic Cape May experience. It is directly at the end of the Cape May Mall, which is a boutique strip mall lined with unique small businesses. Additionally, Congress Hall provides some victoria eye-candy for me when I am on the beach. It is certainly much more pleasing to look at than dusty hotel skyscrapers which are found in other shore towns.

The final condition of my fabric, conflict, is represented by Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church. There is no shortage of reasons why a cathilic church may be shrouded in conflict. Built in 1911, this church contains heavy influences from gothic and romanesque architecture styles. It was named for the Blessed Mother, who is often seen as the “guiding star” to God. This particular church does not have a super-rich historical past like other buildings in Cape May, it was just built to fill the need of a Roman Catholic Church. It was originally built as a small wooden structure across the street. When the great fire of Cape May happened in 1878, the parish was miraculously spared. They decided to move across the street to its current location in 1911. Cape May was a historically protestant city, so there was not a substantial need for a grand cathilic church. As eastern european, Irish, and Italian immigrants settled in New Jersey in the 20th century, the religious demographics shifted to being primarily catholic on the Jersey Shore. Therefore, Our Lady Star of the Sea became more popular. In current times, it has roughly 1,200 year-round parishioners with about 10,000 tourists visiting in the busy season. When I was growing up my family was very catholic. We went to church every single sunday and holy day of obligation. Naturally, even when we were taking day trips to Cape May we would attend mass. As a young child, this was a somber interruption to our otherwise fun and frivolous trip. I can imagine the other children felt the same as me and just wanted mass to end so we could play in the sand. As I grew up and my religious views evolved, I stopped going to church. Therefore the only memories I have of Our Lady Star of the Sea are that of when I was a child and when I would walk past it while shopping. I do not look upon my Cathilic past with fondness, so churches are now a symbol of oppression and negativity for me. Seeing this church while enjoying a summer day in a cute vacation town brings up unpleasant memories. Aside from my personal internal conflict with this church, there is a very apparent architectural conflict. Our Lady Star of the Sea sits smack in the middle of the Cape May strip mall. The storefronts all have Victorian facades with beach-inspired twists and bright paint colors. Contradictingly, the church is a huge hulking stone structure with pointed stained glass windows, a towering asymmetric westwork, and a muted color scheme. Frankly, it sticks out like a sore thumb. This unsubtle structure is likely to bring up unpleasant memories for other people who have strained

relationships with the church as well. The seriousness of organized religion is definitely a sharp contrast to the novelty of a beachside vacation.

In summary, the three structures I have chosen are historic buildings that are hugely relevant to the fabric of Cape May, New Jersey that I have experienced in vastly different ways. My experience as a semi-local gives me a unique perspective that lies somewhere between a local and a tourist. I have spent a lot of time in Cape May throughout my years of living in New Jersey, but I have never spent a night in Congress Hall, and have not spent a night in any other hotel there since I was very young. Every time I am sure to climb the lighthouse and visit the state park right below, along with hundreds of tourists. I walk by Our Lady Star of the Sea and am struck by its conspicuous architecture and heavy thoughts about organized religion. All three of these built structures have been added to the registry of National Historical Places, and are very important to the experience and identity of Cape May. This entire town proves that historic buildings can still be relevant in today's fast-paced world. As a matter of fact they are powerful tools that help us put life in perspective, educate about our past, and allow us to forget about our worries for a little while.

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