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Article (Published version) (Refereed)

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Published by: Bloomsbury, London
ISBN: 9780857853004

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Pages: 148-150

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The Journal of Space Syntax
ISSN: 2044-7507 | Year: 2014 | volume: 5 | issue: 1 | Online Publication Date: 27 August 2014

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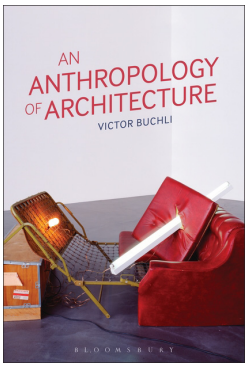
When studying the emergence of social lives from the many contrasting modes of building and inhabitation, what should be our 'key site of analysis'? This is the question Victor Buchli asks (p.22) in his book *An Anthropology of Architecture*. Should it be form, or surface, or perhaps ornamentation? In this volume, an impressive breadth of anthropological studies of architecture – modern, pre-modern, vernacular and rarefied – are drawn together to offer a surprisingly diverse range of approaches to this cross-cutting issue which will be of great value to readers of this journal. In Buchli's survey some fundamental theoretical tenets of space syntax thinking are affirmed, whilst the limits of a methodology based in abstract urban modeling also come into focus. Perhaps, for anthropologists, this diversity of registers in which built forms can be apprehended will come as no surprise, but for the space syntax researchers and practitioners, as well as for urbanists or architects, there are some stark reminders amongst this rich anthropological study.

The book starts with a historical background to the emergence of architectural concerns in anthropology and archaeology, also laying the understanding for some of the highly specialist anthropological language used throughout. The body of the text is largely organised around several themes, allowing historical and cultural comparisons of processes in the production of the built environment. These are: 'institutions and community', 'consumption studies and the home', 'embodiment and architectural form' and 'iconoclasm, decay and the destruction of architectural forms'. Through all of these themes, Buchli constantly brings us back to the realm of the material. Architecture, we are reminded throughout, needs not only (perhaps should not at all?) be seen as having effect at *distance*, as a visual *representation*, or as an inert container for occupation and movement flows. Whereas those 'practising' space syntax are often concerned with the ways these flows are patterned within space, surrounded by boundaries that help structure those patterns, Buchli is concerned with the ways that social beings come into close physical and psychological contact with the material reality of architectural form. Walls, floors, ceilings and the many objects they hold can be touched, built, destroyed, become dirty, get cleaned and have ornaments added to and removed from them. Active uses and physical engagements with these types of materiality are the means by which social relations are made rather than (mis)represented. For example, the family home is not a universal artifact derived from a social unit that is consistent across cultures and history. In contrast, in different ways and in different contexts the home allows kinship to come into being through the building, occupation and even destruction of dwellings (as will be explained further below). In the modern context, the family home is a 'problem-solving entity' (p.72) that stabilises intra-family conflict, and allows binary gender distinctions (as they became seen in the 20th century) to become complementary through the distinct gendered tasks of housework and DIY. Indeed Buchli references other anthropological case studies of culture systems in which a marriage comes into being only with the construction of a marital tent for the couple, or where the death of



An Anthropology of Architecture, 2013.

a family elder renders a home and even an entire village unusable, leading to the deconstruction of both settlement and social coherence in a unified gesture. In Tuareg culture 'to make a tent is literally to get married' (p.145).

The originality of the book comes in its extremely comprehensive and adept gathering of anthropological sources from widely-flung corners – traditional tribal anthropology, studies of Soviet Russian housing, interpretations of modern property markets, hospitals, ruins and so on – constantly reassessing the overarching issues of change, process, occupation, adaptation and all the soft material flows imbricated in the daily lives of buildings.

In space syntax theory we observe material flows at very different timescales. The act of building a home, for example, is not that of creating a marriage or a family unit – as those approaches described above have interpreted it. Instead, randomised processes of building over historically-scaled periods of time come to adhere to certain rules of aggregation which are given naturally by geometric constraints but which become invested with social function through use and re-use. Space syntax analysis, then, takes a static snapshot of urban form at a moment in time and creates an abstract model of lived space, allowing for structural comparisons of both society and urban form across different cultures or periods of history. From one day to the next urban form is stable, at a structural level at least, allowing for the process of 'description retrieval' that Hillier and Hanson[1] (1984) describe as acting upon the information embedded in the particular syntaxes around us, allowing recognition of the overarching structure of society and our particular location within that society at any given moment.

Buchli suggests an approach to the archaeological study of historical cities – upon which comparative space syntax has its basis - that descends from this abstracted plan view back into lived space. Whilst built form itself may be stable at the scale of daily human experience, other historically-specific materials that are intertwined with it – goods, clothing, modes of transport and so on – could have allowed for very different engagements with built spaces. Historical urban forms can be preserved in contemporary cities and suggest structural similarities with older societies, but these other materialities mentioned may suggest starkly different social and psychological responses to built form across history. Furthermore the meaning of built forms may change suddenly because of disruption in these 'soft' material flows, perhaps through death, disease, or social conflict. During the French revolution, Buchli points out, the cobblestones of Parisian streets went from being an inconsequential street surface to a supply of missiles for French revolutionaries, showing that built forms allow people to perform their social relations not just through structural systems and movement patterns but also many diverse and unexpected material engagements with surfaces, openings, decorations and coverings.

Perhaps the most fascinating section of the book is that relating to iconoclasm – the willful destruction of artworks and architectural forms. In most cases the un-building of the environment is framed as decline – the undoing of the physical fabric which

Notes:

[1] *Hillier, B. and Hanson, J. (1984), The Social Logic of Space, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*

space syntax theory studies – or in cases, such as Detroit, as the grounds for rethinking urbanism in response to urban decline (see for example building clearance projects proposed as part of the Detroit Future City plan < http://detroitfuturecity.com/ >). For Buchli, decay demonstrates that 'architectural forms are profoundly animate' (p.157) and he points to several examples demonstrating that the unbuilding of architecture is also a significant material process with its own meanings beyond the social implications of decline. Ruins allow for the fusing of the human built environment with non-human life forms. The willful destruction of works of art instigates a process of change, usually followed by repair or healing, which revives their power to shock and disturb. When it is threatened by traumatic events such as the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, the rationalist architecture of capitalism, often criticised as arbitrary and meaningless, takes on a profound symbolic meaning and is shown not to be devoid of 'spiritual' value. 'Because buildings as such are extensions of the individual and collective minds, when they are destroyed, much more than the individual or building is killed' (p.170). Presumably this should not be taken as a denial of the highly problematic nature of destruction of architecture for those directly affected, but rather a reminder that various material conditions through which it can be carried out – violence, neglect or purposeful dismantling for example – can have different implications for the social relations it holds.

So what could the 'social logic of space' learn from the 'anthropology of architecture', at least as far as Victor Buchli views it? Certainly in a fundamental way they seem, as far as can be understood from this text at least, to agree on one key issue: architecture is not a *representation* of society or humanity but a set of relations and processes *through which* social forms are perpetuated and in the use of which individuals can recognise themselves as participants in some larger social system known as society. This similarity derives perhaps in part from similar theoretical foundations such as the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss' studies of tribal village layouts and social form[2]. As has been mentioned though, this book can also expand thinking on the built environment outwards from quite static notions of layout, value and function and draw attention to less easily visible forces such as flows of materiality, subtle changes in bodily relation to those materials and the social connections made or broken through building and destruction.

Space syntax studies in many ways describe the materiality of the built environment through abstract rules, consequently removing some key issues of the material definition of buildings, and their social practices. Whilst they can reveal vital and fascinating patterns of cities and the solidifying of social forms in material relations of built form over time, they are less powerful in describing the extremely meaningful quotidian material interactions of bodies and buildings: cleaning, maintenance, care, construction, violence, instability and so on. It is, for example, particularly revealing that many space syntax studies concerned with the embedding of bodies in space use virtual reality techniques to investigate the cognitive effects on wayfinding of visible boundaries in the built environment. This is an approach that places emphasis on vision. Implicit is the expectation that sound, smell and physical contact are less important or superfluous to cognitive responses to urban structure. This is in no way a criticism, but a suggestion that a richer understanding of built environments could be gained if these approaches of materiality and modeling were combined in a layered picture of urban reality.

Notes:

[2] *See for example: Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963), Structural Anthropology, (transl. by Jacobson, C. and Schoepf, B. G.), New York: Basic Books.*