

The Meaning of Use and Use of Meaning

Peter Blundell Jones

Studies of indigenous buildings across the world have revealed time and again, that dwelling structures have served as symbolic representations of the world as it was understood by the peoples that produced them. Thus the concept advanced by William Lethaby in his early book, *Architecture Nature & Magic* that ‘the development of building practice and ideas of world-structure acted and reacted on one another’ has repeatedly been substantiated.¹ Examples too numerous to list can be found in the pages of Guidoni’s *Primitive Architecture*,² or Oliver’s more recent *Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture*,³ but to gauge the full richness of possibility one needs to consult deeper ethnographies. A good example is Marcel Griaule’s *Conversations with Ogotemeli*, the classic text on the Dogon.⁴ Here is revealed how the house symbolises the union of man and woman, its parts identified with their various organs, while the façade and its doors symbolise their ancestors stretching back to the primordial couple, at the same time combining the key numbers eight and ten. The orientated square layout of the house reflects the measure and making of fields, the original geometry, and this is further reflected in the technology of weaving, the warp and the weft intersecting like man and woman.⁵ Thus we come full circle, noting that the interlocking mythical system finds in the constructed world endless forms for its reflection, almost as it were looking for them.

¹ W.R. Lethaby, *Architecture Nature & Magic* (Duckworth: London, 1956) p. 16. (reprint of the 1928 version published in *The Builder*, which in turn updated Lethaby’s book *Architecture, Mysticism, and Myth* of 1892).

² Enrico Guidoni, *Primitive Architecture* (Faber: London 1987).

³ Paul Oliver, *Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

⁴ Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemeli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁵ *Ibid.*. Most of this is described in the chapter ‘The Large Family House’, pp. 91-98.

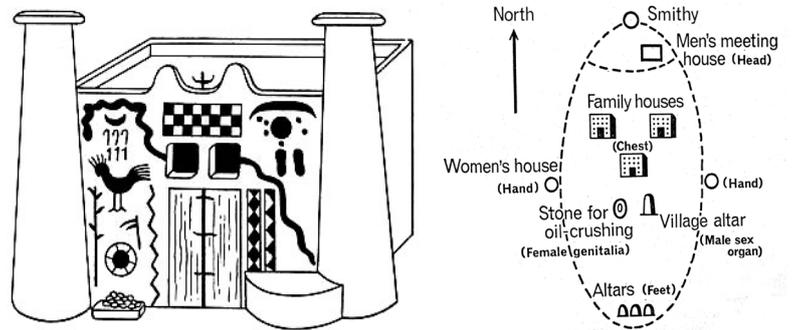


Fig. 1. (Left) Dogon Shrine showing emblems including the chequerboard of geometry, the mythical iron sandals of the smith, the cockerel, and other symbolic figures. Image: Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

Fig. 2. (Right) The ideal Dogon village plan, based on the human body with the Toguna, a kind of parliament, as head. Image: Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁶ We have had 5000 years of cities and writing, 10,000 years of agriculture, at least 100,000 years of language with intelligence at a modern level. The hunter-gatherer existence did not preclude reorganisation of the landscape for symbolic and mnemonic purposes, as studies of modern Aborigines have shown.

In oral cultures, which means for most of human history,⁶ buildings must thus have served as the principal mnemonic base on which memories could be inscribed and passed on to the next generation, and this was arguably the origin of architecture's monumental role. Parents could refer to parts of the building when explaining the order of things to their children, not only through the stated meanings of painted figures on the façade or of holy shrines and god-figures within, but also in the implicit order of the house as a whole, with its open and forbidden areas, its territories in varied ownership. This locally experienced and shared order could be extended to support the idea of a world-house — a world order — or be expanded into imagined houses for gods and animals. Deep ethnographic studies like those of the Hugh-Joneses among the Tukanoans, have further shown that the same house could support different symbolic readings on different occasions, even switching in gender.⁷ We can conclude that symbolic readings are neither fixed nor exclusive. They are always open to reinterpretation, but with the important proviso that the meanings must remain shared.

⁷ Stephen Hugh-Jones, 'Inside out and back to front: the androgynous house in Northwest Amazonia' in Janet Carson and Stephen Hugh Jones (eds.), *About the House* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) pp. 226-252.

Less obvious than those applied paintings or ornaments, which almost demand to become vehicles for conscious symbolic communication, are the implicit orderings in buildings — the structural patterns. Time and again these are found to reflect gender and kinship structures, as in the classic example of the circular Bororo village described by Claude Levi-Strauss.⁸ These Amazonian people had evolved a form of social organisation depending on two moieties or intermarrying groups, each occupying half the perimeter of the village. Property being vested in the female line, it was the males who moved across to join a wife on the other side, having spent the phase after puberty in the central men's house.

⁸ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).

Levi-Strauss reports that a group was persuaded by missionaries to replan their village on a grid, and as a result their social structure fell apart. This example demonstrates how the village plan was more than a mere visible symbol: who you were was linked to where you lived, and the whole social network was daily on display. The village constituted the order of things.

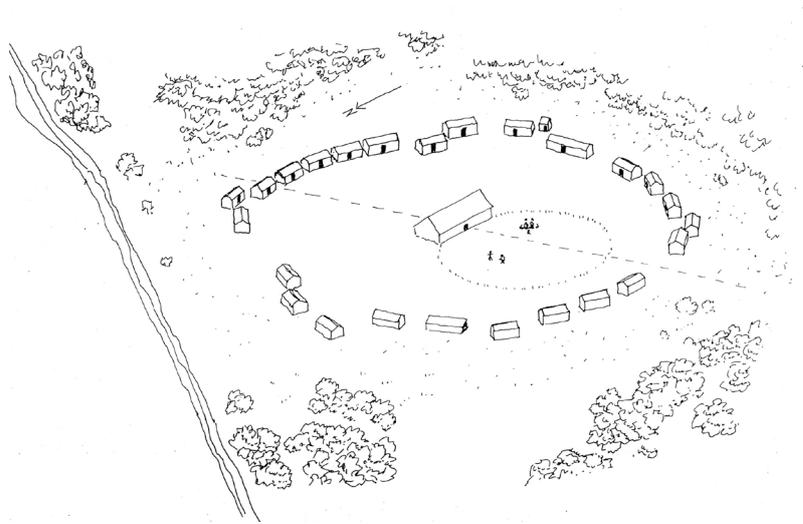


Fig. 3. Bird's eye view sketch of a Bororo village based on the plan in Claude Levi-Strauss's 'Tristes Tropiques'. The ring of huts is divided by a notional axis, shown dotted, which divides the two inter-marrying moieties. In the middle is the men's house with its dancing ground. Image: Peter Blundell Jones.

We can argue further that buildings have always been involved in the framing of rituals, those repeated practical and symbolic acts through which people define relationships and communicate with one another, and which need ordered space in which to 'take place'. I do not just mean the church. A blatant modern and secular example is the law court with its rigid hierarchical arrangements for the various actors in the legal drama. The judge is always on the central axis in the highest seat, and there are complex spatial layerings to keep the various parties out of contact with each other.⁹ But much humbler rituals can also be shown to be played out in buildings, even if we tend to take them for granted. As Mary Douglas showed in a key essay, ordinary meals can be regarded as rituals, for they both mark out time and help define social relationships. They exist in a structured hierarchy along with their settings, from a wedding feast at the Ritz to consuming a Mars Bar in the street.¹⁰ Just as the hotel gives 'place' to the reception, so the street is 'nowhere in particular' or non-place for this example, making a significant contrast.

⁹ All this is a surprisingly recent development: for the history of the English Law court see Clare Graham, *Ordering Law* (London: Ashgate, 2003).

¹⁰ See the essay 'Deciphering a Meal' in Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (London: RKP, 1975).

Architecture gives rituals their settings, whether or not it is designed for the purpose, but usually architects and their clients have it in mind. Certainly it can be difficult to read the symbolic values and ritual implications in buildings of one's own time, but buildings fifty years old and more become obvious and inescapable barometers of social values. Changing patterns in school building between 1850 and 1950, for example, can now be seen to reflect not only changing attitudes to education but also changing attitudes to age, class and gender.¹¹ Doubtless the new school buildings of today will read equally clearly in fifty years time, reminding us of the values of the PFI. We can conclude from all the foregoing that to make an architecture is inevitably to imply a world and a set of relationships.

¹¹ See for example, 'Chapter 3: Formation' in Thomas A. Markus, *Buildings and Power* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Architecture still reflects society

Even if former local rules and habits have been replaced by international ones, and even if buildings have been greatly distanced from social life by technical and bureaucratic processes, architecture still reflects society. For example, we might claim that the mass-housing forms adopted in the 1950s and 60s accurately and appropriately revealed the domination of technical and bureaucratic imperatives over individual lives and wishes. The anonymous repetition of such structures, whether in the form of the hastily built tower blocks in the UK or the larger and more monotonous ones across the Iron Curtain, showed a consensus on the part of the building authorities and their political masters that a kind of equality was being enacted, with rationally defined good standards consistently being put in place, nobody above the average and nobody below it.

The fast rate of social and technological change and an increasingly autonomous building process led in the same period to a widespread belief in loose-fit between buildings and their contents, and a romantic desire for open-ended flexibility. This reached one kind of peak in the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his followers, who proposed a series of universal building types supposedly adaptable to all purposes, all climates and all cultures: truly an international style. This reached a fitting if monumental extreme in the adoption for an art gallery in Berlin of a building type earlier intended as a company headquarters in Cuba.¹² Mies's quest for quiet perfection seduced a generation, but ironically it turned out less a bid for real useful variability than for simple old-fashioned monumentality. Only a building divorced from the impact of its social occupants could be sufficiently indifferent to purpose and time to avoid being touched by life, requiring no kind of conversion. Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie remains a fascination and a puzzle for artists and curators who are always seeking ways to take possession of the aloof, overpowering, and ill-lit space: one exhibit a few years back consisted of offering the

¹² For the full argument see Peter Blundell Jones and Eamonn Caniffe, *Modern Architecture Through Case Studies* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2002), Chapter 14, which deals with this building.

visitors bicycles on which to ride round and round the empty room. It is almost as if, feeling the denial of ritual implications in the architecture, people are obliged to seek them in the void.

More ruthless in his preparedness to abandon architecture's monumental preoccupations, more sincere in his bid for open-ended flexibility, was Cedric Price, who strove to reduce the social public building to a mere servicing framework. The paradigmatic example, though it remained on paper, was the Fun Palace for Joan Littlewood of 1963, a great skeleton of steel trusses and cranes which could be assembled and reassembled in all kinds of guises for as-yet-unpredicted types of theatrical performance. Price later built his Interaction Centre, but it proved less flexible than he hoped and was eventually demolished. The idea of the Fun Palace was taken up again with Centre Pompidou in Paris, designed 1970-71, the breakthrough work of Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers.¹³ An enormous budget was now available to make this technology work: to create the huge frames and the external servicing system, while the idea of an arts centre which could grow and evolve in unpredicted ways rhymed with the informal atmosphere of the late 1960s. But in practice the placing of art galleries like shelves on a rack was soon considered too raw and parts of the building were given added interiors. In nearly 40 years of existence, the much-vaunted flexibility has been little used, while unpredicted changes have occurred against the fundamental concept, like the addition of internal circulation. Most ironic of all is that the anti-monumental arts centre planned by those students in jeans of 1968 has become a world monument, while they have become paragons of architectural respectability. In the absence — even the denial — of an architectural rhetoric about organisation, ritual and memory, it is the technical apparatus that has been monumentalised instead.

¹³ This building is discussed in *Ibid.*, Chapter 14.

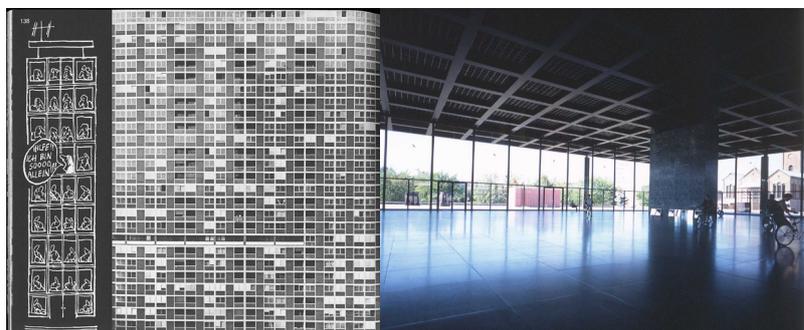


Fig. 4. (Left) Typical page from Rolf Keller's, *Bauen als Umweltzerstörung* (Building as pollution) 1973, decriing the anonymity of post-war mass-housing.
 Fig. 5. (Right) Main exhibition gallery in Mies's Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin, completed 1968. This supposedly universal and flexible space has always posed a challenge to curators, but was enlivened in 2001 by an artwork inviting visitors simply to cycle around in it.

The flexibility cult of the 1960s resulted in a rash of general-purpose building types without much relation to place and purpose, and they tended to be autonomous if not autistic. Experience showed, however, that the future is always unpredictable, and flexibility could only be achieved within set limits. Buildings in practice never seemed to prove flexible enough to resist the need for change. The desired neutrality which went hand in hand with flexibility also proved elusive, for 'neutral' architectures have also turned out in retrospect to belong inevitably to their time, sometimes becoming overbearing in their aloof presence precisely because their order is an abstract and independent one. The call for 'timeless' architecture is also a vain one, for growth and change continuously occur, and to engage with them architecture must be a social product, involving complicity with the inhabitants and feedback from use into building. If sometimes a work like the Barcelona Pavilion appears timeless, we need to remember that it has always existed primarily as a much exposed photographic image, and that its two incarnations as German Pavilion in 1929 (for only 6 months) and as architectural monument in modern tourist Spain have been very different — it is if anything the myth that remains the same.¹⁴

¹⁴ Argued at greater length in *Ibid.*, Conclusion.

To reiterate, making an architecture is inevitably to imply a world and a set of relationships, but these must operate within the terms of a reading — that of the user. Harmony between the implication of the design and the reading of the user perhaps produces the resonance which is to be regarded as architectural success, but there can also be dissonance. Architecture can be restrictive and oppressive, both through its dictatorial or constraining organisation and through imposing ideas about taste, as the buildings and projects of Hitler and Speer in both ways make clear. But architecture can also be liberating and utopian, suggesting new ways to live and think, which if they strike a chord with their public are more widely taken up to receive broader social currency. It can reinterpret social rituals in new and vital ways like Scharoun's Philharmonie in the 1960s¹⁵ or Miralles's more recent Scottish Parliament. It can also identify a place and a nation with extraordinary power, as in the case of Utzon's Sydney Opera House, in retrospect the first modern icon building, and herald of the current tendency. Architecture can be an instrument of propaganda or a bringer of hope. It cannot altogether renounce these duties.

¹⁵ See Chapter 10 The Concert Halls, in Peter Blundell Jones, *Hans Scharoun* (London: Phaidon, 1995).