

Cultural Aspects of Design: An Introduction to the Field

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1. Introduction ¹

Cultural aspects of design, as a field of study, focuses on the complex relationship, interaction and correspondence between cultural processes and principles of design. Within anthropology, this complexity of relationship, interaction and correspondence is usually studied in terms of the spatial patterning of the environment and the spatial arrangement of the social world. Space, as well as time, is given meaning through its symbolic and metaphorical ordering (Fernandez, 1986), and the basis of that order is culture. Social life and its social space are seen as dialectical; each accommodates and recreates the other.

The anthropological perspective defines 'design' as one aspect of material culture, that is, cultural ideas expressed spatially in a physical form (Kent, 1984). Designed environments are material culture in the sense that their given form reflects cultural ordering, and the cultural principles of their formation can be understood as a communication system, decoded by ethnographic and archaeological methods and analytic techniques (Rapoport, 1982; Moore, 1986; Basso, 1982; Richardson, 1982).

Design is also a culture-making process in which ideas, values, norms and beliefs are spatially and symbolically expressed in the environment to create new cultural forms and meanings. Designed environments can be created by human ecological forces, such as patterns of settlement created by farming techniques and mineral extraction procedures; by direct human intervention based on cultural traditions or historical context, such as vernacular or popular architecture; and by direct, self-conscious professional intervention, such as an architect's design for a high style building. Design, thus, refers both to the given form and the form-giving properties of the built environment.

Contemporary 'culture', as an object of study, also has many definitions; each is related to a theoretical approach and emphasizes a specific methodology. Culture can be studied as rules of behaviour through field observations and ethnographic description. Rules are described as social structure which orders and patterns behaviour in culturally meaningful ways. Culture also can be approached as cognitive structure in which one studies the native's point of view through interviews. The cognitive structure encoded in language serves as a template of ideas. Both culture as behaviour and

¹ The ideas and cultural typology for this paper were developed through discussions and writing with Erve Chambers of the University of Maryland, and were applied to housing and design in the introduction to our forthcoming book from the University of Pennsylvania Press, "Housing, Culture and Design: A Comparative Perspective.

culture as cognition are conservative definitions of culture in that they emphasize the constraints on behaviour through structural or linguistic rules.

Two additional views of culture, culture as a symbolic process and culture as an interpretive process are intended to emphasize the changing and reflexive qualities of culture. Artefacts as symbols reflect socially constructed, and shared cultural meanings. In-depth field research is required to decode and discover those meanings. Culture, when defined as an interpretive process, refers to the changing meanings and actions over time. Cultural knowledge is produced, reproduced and transformed through behaviour, language and symbolic representation, but is also interpreted or understood within the particular sociopolitical context and historical period.

Each of these definitions adds a layer to the understanding of culture and cultural processes. In terms of research and analysis, this complexity means that behaviour, what people think, what they believe and value, and how they interpret the world will influence their response to and creation of an environment.

2. Cultural Aspects of Design: Areas of Analysis

These views of culture and its modes of study translate into four areas of analysis that can be considered as a typology for cultural aspects of design research, theory and methodology. The areas focus on cultural processes as they articulate with the design of the environment, and are referred to as: 1) culture as social structure, 2) culture as cognitive structure, 3) culture as a meaning system, and 4) culture as interpretation. Each area is described and then discussed with reference to the articles presented in this special issue on "Space and Culture: Explorations in Spatial Form and Cultural Meaning".

Culture as social structure refers to behaviour as it is expressed in family, neighbourhood and community groups. The rules and norms of behaviour, the politics of the spatial groupings, and the dynamics of how the social groupings influence the spatial arrangement in the house, neighbourhood and community are the focus of study.

Sociopolitical, economic and religious structure is researched, both to identify the familial and/or community value structure for new designs and to explain why the community has certain kinds of housing or a particular spatial/social structural configuration. Many of these social structural design studies are about social and cultural change as expressed in the dialectic of changing gender roles and spatial arrangements of the domestic environment.

Culture as cognitive structure refers to linguistic elements which reflect the rules that govern spatial arrangements. These rules are expressed so as to reflect the appropriateness of certain spatial relationships and built forms. Studies include ethnosemantic analyses of culturally appropriate design forms and details, and of mental maps which express the cognitive ordering of the environment.

Culture as a meaning system refers to studies of symbolism in and personalization of the built environment and landscape. This area is a vast field in that the environment might be viewed as a symbolic system which encodes cultural meanings both in the small scale details of a house or a room, and in the large scale form of a landscape or the plan of a temple or a town. The study of culture as a meaning system includes analyses of ritual form and process expressed in the designed environment and notions about personal and social sacred space applied to contemporary design.

Culture as interpretation refers to how people read and respond to space and spatial arrangements in culturally appropriate ways, using cues from the past, the present and their perceptions of the future. The study of culture as interpretation attempts to weave the social, historical and cultural elements into a sensitive understanding of a particular place within the constraints of the epoch, cultural setting and sociopolitical reality.

There can be, and in fact is, considerable overlap between these areas of study. An interpretive study can, for example, be concerned primarily with rules of social structure, or a symbolic study might be developed out of cognitive clues to behaviour. Still, each of the four areas demarcates a distinct meaning to the term culture.

3. Cultural Analysis of Spatial Arrangements: Anthropological Contributions to the Cultural Aspects of Design

The articles presented in this special issue illustrate three of these four areas in their approaches to the cultural analysis of spatial arrangements. Denise Lawrence's study of the suburbanization of Portuguese agro-town house types, and Deborah Pellow's study of compounds in a neighbourhood of Accra, Ghana, both emphasize the social structural basis of culture as reflected in changing gender relations and spatial form. Lawrence is concerned with the coincidence of two changes in spatial behaviour that correspond with the appearance of the suburban houses in a rural community, and the unintended, gender related consequences of these changes. The new house form, that resulted from men working outside the community for better wages, has increased the number and specialization of rooms and provided more individual privacy and family solidarity; but, in this process, women have lost their control over domestic relations and autonomy in the home. Further, increased lot size and separation of the house from the street have reduced opportunities for groups of women to meet and control their neighbourhood space, and have increased social isolation.

Pellow, on the other hand, traces the changes in the Sabon *zongo*, an urban community made up of traditional African compounds, to the weakened influence of Hausa custom and Muslim law. The *zongo* is no longer occupied by one family that controls and defines the space, but is made up of multiple tenants, coming from diverse cultural, religious and spatial traditions. Many of the observed changes in spatial arrangements of the interior spaces and the erosion of the separation between men and women suggest a liberalization of attitudes about gender roles, resulting from the cultural plurality of the residential situation.

Norris Brock Johnson's study of a Zen Buddhist temple in Kyoto, Japan, focuses on the symbolic and metaphorical aspects of culture. He relates his analysis of the Tenryu-ji temples and garden to three cross-cultural examples of body:temple correspondence in which the transcendence of sacred architecture is united with the existential situation of being human. Johnson argues that the spatial properties of the temple site create the mind/body consciousness of the Zen Buddhist meditation environment when the meditating priest completes the spatial composition.

Ellen Pader's comparison of Mongolian nomads and English Gypsies employs an interpretive approach to explore spatial relations as a means by which groups organize and reproduce their societies. By concentrating on the commonplace activities of acculturating peoples, Pader is able to trace how changes in the position of objects and the arrangement of space can be a powerful sign of social change. As in the papers by

Lawrence and Pellow, changes in gender roles and social status are reproduced in the organization and symbolism of spatial patterns. But Pader sees this "spatiality" as playing a

"critical role in the formation and reformation, interpretation and reinterpretation of society".

While agreeing with Lawrence and Pellow that spatial relations reflect sociopolitical, economic, and cultural changes, she is more concerned with how these relations become part of the 'natural' environment and legitimize power relations.

The cognitive definition of culture is hardly represented in these papers, although Pellow, Pader and, to some degree, Johnson all draw upon linguistic cues as part of their analysis. Together, these papers provide provocative new evidence of the importance of cultural analysis in decoding and illuminating meanings expressed in the design of the environment.

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