

# VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE - WHERE DO THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS COME FROM?

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*Vernakularna arhitektura - od kod izvirajo simbolični pomeni?*

## izvleček

Izvori oblik vernakularne arhitekture in njihovo bogastvo simbolizmov je še vedno uganka za interdisciplinarno antropologijo, hkrati pa osnova za današnje arhitekturne študije. Interpretacije so si precej vsaka sebi, odvisno od avtorjev oziroma njihovih strok. Zasnova hiše je ponavadi plod enega ali več zunanjih faktorjev socio-kulturnega okolja. Drugi favorizirajo simbolne zasnove strukturnih analogij kozmičnim redom ali antropomorfnim usmeritvam in razlikam. Članek daje kritični pregled teh interpretacij klasične antropologije in jih potencira z antropološkimi elementi, usmerjenimi na antropološko definicijo arhitekture in njeno zagotavljanje semantičnih in simbolnih modelov za harmonično organizacijo grajenega v okolju.

## abstract

*The origins of vernacular house forms and the wealth of symbolisms expressed by them is still a riddle for disciplinary anthropology as well as in the framework of recent architectural research. Interpretations vary considerably according to disciplines of interpreters and their theoretical backgrounds. House forms are most frequently attributed to external singular or multiple factors or sociocultural conditions. Others favour symbolic concepts of structural analogies to the cosmic order or anthropomorphous allusions and gender distinctions. The present paper critically reviews these interpretations of conventional anthropology and contrasts them with an anthropological approach focussed on the anthropological definition of architecture and its function of providing semantic and symbolic models for the harmonious organisation of built form and the environment.*

## ključne besede:

vernakularna arhitektura, antropologija, izvor, simbolizem, hiša

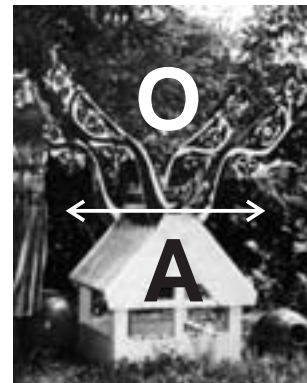
## key words:

vernacular architecture, anthropology, origin, symbolism, house

The "Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World" (EVAW) edited by Paul Oliver can be considered as a milestone in global house research. It has raised the ethnology of the house and of dwelling to a new global level. What conventionally was attributed to folklore studies too is included. In view of this global collection of data related to traditional house cultures it is not surprising that expressions like "the anthropology of the house" and "anthropology of architecture" are increasingly used. Questioning the origins of house traditions, their relation to social structure and their often dense symbolisms has become a new standard.



Slika 1: What a strange building! It seems basically geometrically conceived like a house or a houselike container on a post. On the other hand it shows a tremendous dynamism in regard to what we call decoration. There is a bird on top and for the rest we see fernlike protrusions with subdivisions and in many directions mainly above the roof. (Salong Mausoleum from Rumah Laseh, Kejaman, Sarawak; Dorothy Pelzer, 1968 [Waterson 1990:201])  
*Čudna zgradba! Deluje kot simetričen objekt na drogu, ki po drugi strani spominja na dekorativne elemente. Na vrhu je ptič, pod njim pa v vse smeri štrleči izrastki.*



Slika 2: Here too, the rooftop is protruding. And like in the first example: birds. Do they indicate a relation with the heavens, with the cosmos? This is the way many peoples interpret such symbolisms. But probably there is another way to understand this, more related to architecture. (House shaped tomb (joro) at Lumban Silambi, Toba; Bartlett 1934 [Waterson 1990:212])  
*Tudi tukaj streha "štrli" in prav tako ima na vrhu ptiča. Gre za povezavo z nebesi, kozmosom? Mnogi to tako interpretirajo, a razlago gre verjetno iskati v zvezi z arhitekturo samo.*

Slika 3: Maybe this example might help us with a somehow more simple model. It is closely related to the above example (Festival to appease the dead). It shows four strongly curved-types of branches protruding from a small whitewashed hut. Seen with the naturalists eyes we never would be able to understand what is meant. The lower part is artificial, Architecture (A). The upper part is natural, evidently vital. Both parts are structurally and physically related. However it is difficult to understand why: it seems to be a "Maximum-Contrast-Form". Above/below, natural/artificial, stable/dynamic. (O) in contrast to (A) for Architecture and stability, place etc.. We call the principle in this maximum contrast form "categorical polarity", or "polar harmony". Note that, though very different in their specific forms, both roofs have something in common, "categorical polarity". We can say: there is a "(categorically) polar analogy" among them. They are both quasi identical in regard to the principle of polar

harmony. thus, they are not only aesthetically balanced, they represent an order. If we assume that this balanced order can be small or spatially extended into the relation of heaven and earth, we can say that our two houses are the basic foundation of a potentially harmonious world order implying "All in One and One in All" ('Hen kai pan' in ancient Greece). Note that we are speaking of a basically aesthetic concept, which has a universally harmonious and unifying meaning. (Iban 'sungkup' burial hut made for the great festival to entertain the dead, 'Gawai Antu'; Sandin 1963 [Waterson 1990:201] *Mogoče nam lahko ta model, s štirimi ukrivljenimi štrlečimi vejami, pomaga razumeti prejšnja primera. Naturalistično gledano je spodnji del Arhitektura (A) kot umetno, spodaj stabilno. Zgornji del (O) je kontrast (A): zgoraj naravno, dinamično. Ta princip najmočnejšega kontrasta imenujemo "kategorična polarnost" ali "polarna harmonija". Oba primera sta navidezno identična po principu polarne harmonije in nista le estetsko uravnotežena, temveč predstavljata tudi red. Če predpostavimo, da lahko ta uravnoteženi red apliciramo na relacijo nebesa / zemlja, lahko rečemo, da sta morda ti hiši osnovi harmonije v svetu - "Vse v enem in eno v vsem".*

Let us have a look at a photo (Fig. 1) published by Roxana Waterson in her book on Southeast Asian vernacular architecture with the title "The living House" (1990). The picture shows a small houseform used as a Mausoleum. The roof is surrounded by wildly protruding plant symbolisms. A kind of vernacular Baroque? How can we understand such 'dynamic' decorations of roofs and houseforms? Fig. 2 and 3 give some further examples. Maybe this world adheres to a particular deep-rooted philosophy which we may know from other regions of the world? For instance in China where, on sacred buildings, we find wild dragons on dynamically curved roofs, contrasting immensely with the 'rigid rationality' of the lower part of the structure?

Evidently, such questions can not easily be answered. First, because conventional anthropology is a fairly heterogeneous discipline with numerous subdisciplines, views, approaches, theories. In addition most of these subdisciplines and approaches are formed by the European history of culture and thus often project prejudices on the materials rooted in other cultures.

Thus the methods to do research with traditional house cultures are still very heterogeneous, as can be seen in the first volume of the encyclopedia with its numerous disciplinary, culturo-theoretical, and environmental perspectives. In addition we have the countless objective conditions of "design" and production as they are described in volume 2 and 3.

In fact, the vernacular house is a highly complex phenomenon. We risk endless approaches without really understanding the essence of the house. In the following we want to shortly outline how cultural anthropology understands the 'anthropology of the house'. Basically there are the following questions:

- 1) Is the vernacular house merely the result of external factors that were perceived by humans and used to produce house forms?
- 2) Or was it rather the human being producing ideas which were materialized and kept through time, thus producing often bizarre forms as an expression of the human mind?
- 3) Or, can we understand the house itself and its precursors as a relatively autonomous development, which autonomously produced structural conditions which were perceived by human beings, were then actively recreated and further developed?

Most anthropologists and architectural house researchers would emphasise points one and two in combination. Most would be sceptical in regard to point 3, or would even reject it completely. Later on we want to show that point 3 makes sense and allows best to explain the great variety of forms and arrangements. But first we will shortly outline the conventional arguments.

## The Conventional Anthropology of the Traditional House The origins of the vernacular house

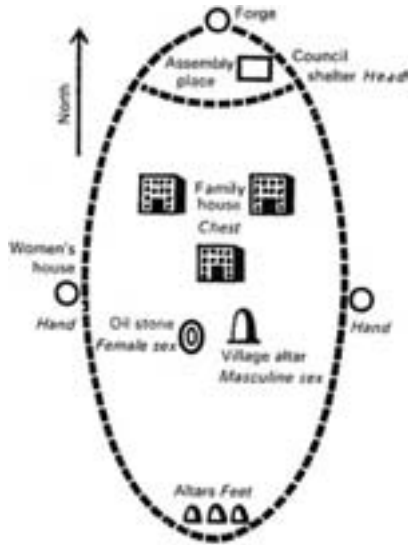
Let us first do a short excursion by following the entry "Anthropology" in the first volume of the Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World. Reimar Schefold gives a good outline of the problem of the anthropological approach towards vernacular architecture.

Factor-analysis [Rapoport]: Amos Rapoport was one of the first who in new ways studied traditional house forms worldwide with a specifically developed method. His factor analysis, as it can be called, is known today to a wider public interested in architecture and is also still used by many in spite of its highly problematic structure. Rapoport has basically interpreted house forms as individual units, which is a rather problematic assumption. In fact the traditional house is, in whatever culture, always an accumulation of various and different lines of development. The roof is a primary evolutionary line. Similarly the entrance, the window and the walls have their own developments. Similarly the fireplace, the hearth, the stove. All these components have their own lines of development and can combine to form this or that type of house according to various conditions. Consequently Rapoport's method is a rationalistic approach, which deforms our view rather than clarifying our understanding of the traditional house.

Sociocultural factors [Morgan]: house forms can also be strongly related to patterns of cultural behaviour, of cultural values and worldviews. Lewis Henry Morgan had been a precursor of such studies using the method of factor analysis. He identified various types of social behaviour and customs which could be related to the longhouse among Indian tribes researched. Morgan's basic framework was his theory on the social evolution of mankind (savagery, barbarism, civilisation) which he combined with an evolution of family structure (promiscuous, monogamy, patriarchal monogamy) and further also with data related to the "Houses and House-life of American Aborigines" (1881). Among the Iroquois who - according to his classification - lived a primitive communism, he interpreted the longhouse in regard to this communal life, particularly in regard to the capacity to invite outsiders and to offer them great hospitality. But, in this case too, one will have to remain sceptical in regard to such unilinear correlations. They transmit the impression of a purely functional first hand evaluation.

Symbolic conceptions [Griaule/Dieterlen]: Referring to Martin Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen (1954/1963) Schefold maintains further that symbolic conceptions are culturally important paradigms. Concepts of the adequate order and relations in the "social and cosmic universe" can play an important role in the construction of a house. Griaule and Dieterlen's report about the Dogon huts in Mali had shown how a "very complex cosmology" finds its expression in an "esoteric anthropomorphical symbolism" which influences the plan of the houses and settlements and also defines their form. Such studies doubtless produce a certain fascination because they reveal an unexpected spiritual grandeur in what is considered simple in the framework of conventional ideas of primitivism. However, such studies mainly based on interviews should also sceptically be questioned. For many researchers the expressions 'cosmos' and 'cosmology' are very quick at hand. A closer view shows that the emphasis of the term is on the concept of a well structured or aesthetic order. In its European history this could spatially be extremely limited. In Ancient Greece it could mean a local military order or could be limited on the face like "cosmetics" [Kerscheneiner, 1962]. From the 14th century in Europe the

term was used in astronomy and thus gained its universal dimensions. Evidently anthropological research is unbiasedly ready to accept such terms. They are filled with Eurocentric contents without critically asking about the factual local implications. Here too there are great risks to commit mistakes which should be avoided.



Slika 4: Schefold mentions this example of an "anthropomorphism in the idealised plan of a Dogon settlement". Evidently there is not much similarity with our Eurocentric view of the human figure. It would be interesting to clarify these indicators further with the attempt to be able to understand the conditions of the whole image behind. [EVAW 1:7]

*Schefold navaja ta primer kot antropomorfizem v idealiziranem načrtu Dogonskega naselja. Z našega evrocentričnega gledišča podobnost s človeško figuro ni opazna.*

Multiple factor thesis [Schefold]: Finally Schefold gives his own overall conclusion saying that there are many factors defining houseform. One of these factors can be of great importance, but the interaction of several factors can be equally important. Referring to the cross culturally comparative method of anthropology or ethnology Schefold emphasises the importance of traditions. Communally important conditions may have developed basic forms among some groups or cultures, whereas considerable variations are shown among neighbouring or related units. It is clear, the comparative method of anthropology lacks history. Neither written nor monumental sources are available. Consequently the insights remain vague and often speculative. We can not maintain anything of a really reliable character. If on the other hand house research - by means of technological periodisation for instance - manages to introduce new temporal criteria, this might be of considerable importance.

### **The symbolic meaning of the vernacular house**

Symbolic dimensions: Not all anthropological studies are focused on genetic factors in regard to houseform. Schefold interpretes symbolic meanings in a similarly important autonomous dimension. "After all, in most traditional societies the house is man's most important three dimensional creation. It creates space within space, it places borders around a piece of the universe and, in so doing," Schefold continues, the house "is the thing which obviously can serve as an expression of conceptions about the world in its entirety." Evidently this suggestion too has a projective character. If we assume that the cultural process of space conception runs from local models to the environmental and, very late in cultural history, to the universal, then, the basic ontology or "worldview" must consequently be searched in an

environmental model or "microcosmic" prototype, not in the universe.

Schefold mentions examples related to three different types of symbolic meanings: cosmos symbolism [Eliade], social organisation [Cunningham] and gender symbolism [Bourdieu]. We want to critically discuss these three groups in the following.

Cosmos-symbolism [Eliade]: Schefold operates with wellknown theories in this context, as in the following example, implicitly referring to Mircea Eliade [1995a, b]. In many regions of Southeast-Asia - he says - the longhouse is considered a symbolic representation of a threepartite cosmos. Heaven, earth and underworld appear in the symbolic meaning attributed to the roof, the living rooms and the basis below. "The house thus forms a miniature cosmos, micro-cosmos." Evidently this interpretation reflects Mircea Eliade's spatial structuralism. In early civilisations and before, man had become overwhelmed in view of the endless spaces of the cosmos and therefore, honouring these dimensions, reproduced these axial systems on earth in his environment "en miniature" as sacred places, temples and so on. Of course, as indicated above, this is also a (theologically founded) Eurocentric concept. However, if we rather emphasise evolutionary principles of hominid space perception, Mircea Eliade can also be interpreted inversely. We would then have to say: "the house traditions mentioned show a stereotype order of categorical polarity, which reflects analogies to the environment perceived in tripartite ways of heaven, intermediate world and lower world". The origins of this perception are not assumed in the perception of macrocosmic structural conditions as it is maintained in the case of Eliade, but are considered to be related to a model within the tradition of the society researched. The concept of "macrocosm" in this evolutionary view would thus be merely a vague speculation, a structural projection using the local model.

Social organisation [Durckheim/Mauss, Raspers; Cunningham]: The second group too shows its strong leaning to the Eurocentric tradition of theories: French positivism, in particular Durckheim and Mauss with the thesis of the social origins of symbolic classification. In this context Schefold hints to Raspers's survey of the Javanese house. Its internal divisions show the attribution of a sacred, closed and female internal part with a profane open and male part. Raspers interpretes this as a socio-cosmic dualism which - according to him - is characteristic for Java in general. Here too one should be aware that the primary conditions of this concept are related to macrocosmic dimensions. Evidently it would be more difficult to search the microcosmic prerequisites in Javanese culture. However, the primacy of social organisation as maintained by positivism has been questioned, says Schefold. But the "holistic view remains that various aspects of a culture are interconnected in an all-embracing order, the basis for all structural anthropological approaches. "Cunningham's study of the Atoni on Timor shows how social (lineage), political and cosmological oppositions define the House of the Atoni and the life within. They can be taken as an example how traditional societies lacking script can store their ideas within the house. This may be valid for those living within the concerned tradition, but might be much more difficult to understand for those who come from outside somehow like "aliens".

Gender-symbolism [Bourdieu]: Finally Schefold hints to Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the Berber house (1972) which is described as strongly characterised by gender symbolisms. Female categories, which imply darkness, are connected to the internal part of the house. This stands in strong contrast to male



aspects indicating outside. They are considered cultural, are implying fertilising capacities and are related to bright light. Correspondingly, the main gate is important. It has to be in the east, letting the virile light enter. Here too we can take these informations as they are and attribute them to a general symbolic disposition of man. On the other hand we can remain sceptical and ask for the models within the society concerned.

House societies: In an anthropology of the house, Levi-Strauss' indication (1982) on the importance of the term house ("societes de la maison") among many European aristocrats should not be neglected. In this framework, the house in its physical formation appears as a fundamental category, as objectification of common interests, however, limited on certain social strata. Ancient names, founder titles, ritual functions and sacred heritage were related to such a "moral person of the house". It forms the point of convent for group formations.

**The projection of euro-historical disciplines**

The problem of all these heterogeneous interpretations consists in the fact that to a great extent they project Euro-historically founded concepts on foreign materials. The methodological relations are not clarified. How do they all relate, these various symbolic meanings? Are they basically different from each other? Or do they seem different to us, only because we tend to classify them differently (anthropomorphous, gender-relations, macro/micro-cosmic, inside/outside spatially etc.)? Are they connected in quite different ways than we would expect? Do these societies search for oppositions in general in order to combine them into harmonious units irrespective of their factual content? Are we confronted with an entirely different philosophy?

Schefold closes his contribution by emphasising the potentially fertile cooperation between architects and anthropologists, but he sees both domains fairly different. In the conventional sense of interdisciplinarity he thinks the two fields might be able to produce positive results by close cooperations.

However, this is a very onesided presentation. It is based on the idea that anthropology, particularly cultural anthropology, or social anthropology offers a sufficiently stable system, a system which can easily integrate architecture somehow as a new subdiscipline. But this is a far too simplified view. Conventionally it has to do with the professional "low-contact factor" between anthropologists and architects.

This last sentence leads us to the other side. Architecture itself has also developed its own anthropological architectural theory, mainly as a reaction against an intra-professional problem. We are speaking of the architectural crisis triggered by the art historians in the end 60ies of the last century. Some people call it the "Charles Jencks-coup"! It included the death-declaration of modernism and the return to style history [postmodernism]. It also postulated written history of architecture as architectural theory!

We want to shortly outline this new "intra-disciplinary" anthropology of architecture in the following:

**The Anthropology of Habitat and Architecture Structure, Methods and new Outlooks**

Its main starting points were the rather chaotic discussions between Modernism and Postmodernism in the domain of architecture. The new position critically points to the irrational dissection of aesthetically defined "high" architecture and pragmatic "low" building which is basically responsible for the hollow rhetorics in the architectural field at present (ca. 100 different styles, acc. to Jencks). Further, "Vitruvianism" is



Slika 5: Architectural Anthropology: This scheme shows the main lines of the evolution of constructivity and architecture.

- (1) shows the hominoid tradition of nestbuilding, treenests, nightcamps and groundnests with rooted materials, the latter forming the subhuman prototype of architecture.
  - (2) A further important process is the evolution of the semantic domain: the use of fibrous and fibroconstructive signs and symbols. Most important in this line are the impacts of the first tools: materials can be cut and transported elsewhere for construction which allowed a great formal, functional and topological differentiation of early architecture. Equally important is the development of categorical polarity with semantic architecture. It forms a model to see categorical polarity of natural forms (e.g. top and trunk of tree, horns and head of animals etc.) in analogy with the categorical polarity of self made artefacts.
  - (3) The later huts and houses are formed by the two primary lines.
  - (4) The primary sedentary type is agrarian village, in which semantic architecture is the source of ontological developments.
  - (5) The urban line takes over the agrarian system but manipulates it either by monumentalising (temples) or verbalising and fixing it in this form (e.g. AT). These transitions are of great importance even today. But many are not aware of these connexes and transitions. Conventional theories are fixed on history in the strict sense. The new traits only show when using structural history (ethno(pre-) history [or 'anthropological definition of material culture]).
- Antropologija arhitekture: Shema prikazuje glavne smeri razvoja konstrukcij in arhitekture.*
- (1) prikazuje hominoidno tradicijo gradnje gnezd . Gnezda na tleh so prototipi arhitekture.
  - (2) Uporaba vlaknastih materialov in iznajdba prvih orodij omogoča prenos materialov iz nahajališča na mesto gradnje. S tem se zgodi pomemben premik v obliki, funkciji in topološki diferenciaciji prvih arhitektur. Prav tako se razvije kategorična polarnost s semantično arhitekturo.
  - (3) Kasnejše hiše izhajajo iz dveh glavnih smeri razvoja.
  - (4) Primarni arhetip je poljedelska vas, kjer se iz semantične arhitekture razvije ontologija.
  - (5) Urbana smer razvoja zasenči poljedelski sistem in ga spreminja bodisi v monumentalizacijo (templji) ali v obskurnost. Ti prehodi igrajo pomembno vlogo tudi še danes, kljub temu da se jih marsikdo ne zaveda, saj konvencionalne teorije smatrajo zgodovino v absolutni luči. Novejše raziskave kažejo zgodovino arhitekture v drugačni luči.

considered as "architectural theory", in fact a regress into 19th century concepts, or, in other words, a post-modern architectural fundamentalism. In addition, Rykwert's book "On Adams House" (1972) searches the ideas of the "primordial hut" in the Bible, which can be taken as an indicator for the complete helplessness of art historians if it comes to clarify evolutionary questions in regard to architecture (similarly Rykwerts "dancing column" 1996)! See in this context also the incredibly narrow-minded "librarywork-program" of the ETH-Z/gta-institute under Oechslin. [Oechslin, 2003]

In this critical framework architecture is newly defined in scientific terms as "all what man and his predecessors built and build." This new anthropological definition leads us to some basic discoveries! First we become aware of a technologically new "fibroconstructive industry" which is of pre-lithic importance and suggests an entirely new temporal framework to discuss architecture in an evolutionary dimension. Two different and new domains of architecture are discovered, "subhuman architecture" and "semantic architecture". We gain a new classification:

- (1) subhuman (nestbuilding behaviour of the Great Apes),
- (2) semantic (life-tree- fetish- maypole-complex),
- (3) domestic (vernacular architecture),
- (4) sedentary (settlement core complex) and
- (5) urban architecture (early city-states and the monumentalisation of fibroconstructive village cultures) [Egenter, 1992].

### Some general points

Methodologically this new classification of architecture calls for a new approach derived from "structural history" [Wernhardt 1981]. It is called "ethno(pre-)historical method" [Egenter 1994a]. Material culture is not studied conventionally according to different disciplines like prehistory, history and ethnology. It is defined anthropologically, that is collectively. This has great advantages for architectural research. In fact, architecture, with its endless examples of "fibrous materials" used in ethnology and folklore cultures, now lets us discover a "soft prehistory" [Egenter 1986, 1990d] which might have been much more important than the "hard prehistory" of the archaeologists. "Soft prehistory" produces new perspectives in regard to the "artefact" concept. Most exciting is the new term "prelithic fibroconstructive industries" because the artefact concept gains new temporal depth, particularly with the primary class of "subhuman architecture".

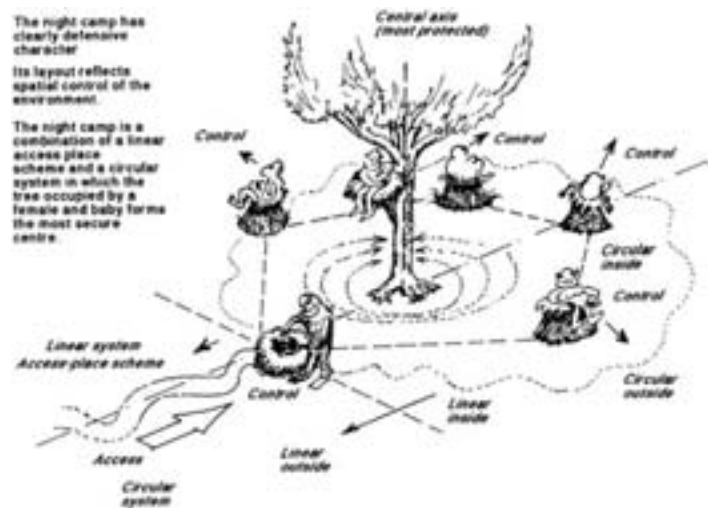
A second important point: semantic architecture had important functions in the generation of sedentary life and culture. Its toposemantic characteristics allowed it to develop into a temporary or sedentary territorial demarcation system in which certain social individuals or groups transmitted their territorial claims to other individuals or social groups in the present, and, by cyclical renewal of the fibrous demarcation to later individuals or social groups. As a perceptual and conceptional model "semantic architecture" autonomously introduced and developed high ontological values which later became the basis of aesthetics, cognition, and religion [Egenter, 2001].

Both classes also provide us with entirely new artefact depths. Architecture can now be considered with an artefact depth of 16 million years. And constructive behaviour can be considered with 22 million years of temporal depth. This will lead to quite new types of organisation of our knowledge regarding the human past. Constructive behaviour, architecture and sedentary life will become very important factors in our theories of cultural evolution [Egenter, 2001]

Fig. 5 (Slika 5) shows these fairly new parameters outlined in a schema which lets us understand the evolution of architecture and culture in close relationship. Note that not the toolmaker is the central figure anymore, we put the capacity to construct with fibrous materials ("constructivity", Yerkes 1929), and its products "architecture", "demarcated habitat" and "increasingly sedentary life", finally "monumentalisation of fibrous culture" into the centre of the process of hominisation. Important is also the degree of expanding space perception and space control. We can conclude a lot from the structural models we discover in this new



Slika 6: Japanese primatologists have produced a measured plan of the nightcamp of a gorilla group. [Izawa/Itani 1966, in Egenter 1983] This drawing shows a perspective into the night camp of this gorilla group, using the indicated measurements of Izawa and Itani. For better visibility the bamboo grove has been cleared on the drawing to give an impression how social relations work in this temporary settlement.  
*Japonski primatologi so predstavili prva prenočišča goril (night camp). Bambus na sliki je prestavljen, tako da so lahko bolje predstavljene socialne vezi med bivalci tečasne nasebline.*



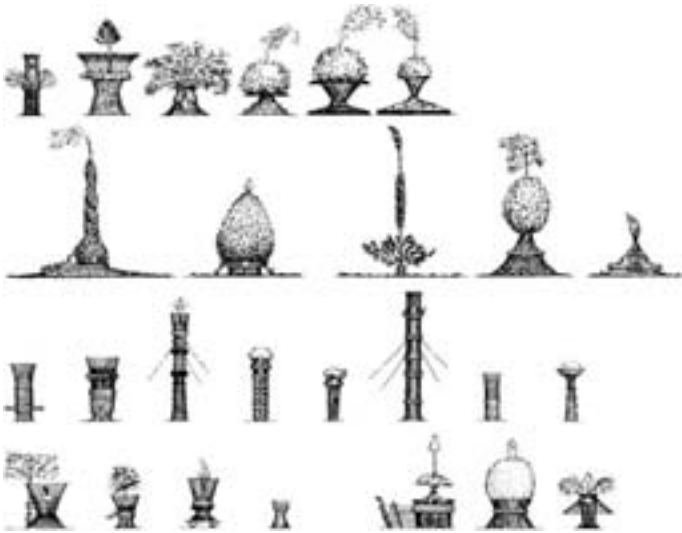
Slika 7: Same arrangement like above. Great Apes show a very clear sense for spatial order. The female and her baby have their nest in the centre and above the ground. They are protected by five other individuals including the dominant male with their tower like nests strategically protecting the centre. [Egenter 1992, 2001]  
*Enaka razporeditev kot na prejšnji sliki. Velike opice imajo izostren občutek reda v prostoru. Mati z otrokom ima svoje gnezdo v centru in nad tlemi, čuva jih pet ostalih posameznikov, vstevši dominantnega samca, ki z gnezda "na stolpu" strateško varuje center.*

perspective. There are essentially five evolutionary lines, all surviving into the present as "living traditions". The first three are most important here.

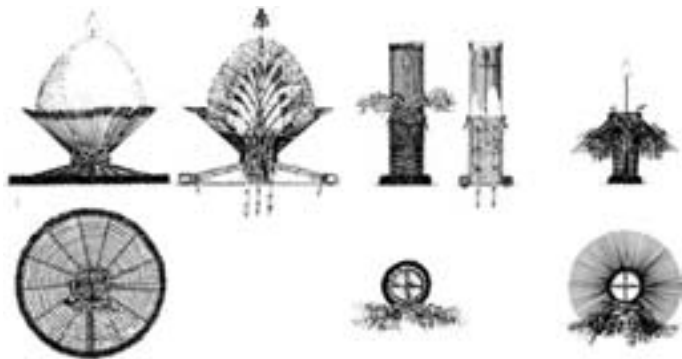
### Five Evolutionary Lines

In the primate world constructive behaviour has deep roots (22 million years). A tremendous tradition, which - from the beginning takes place in arboreal space with nests partly high up in the trees. Nests are fibrous constructions with arms and hands as 'first tools'. The fabrication of tree nests includes things like the experience of self produced, reliable stability of a construction,





Slika 8: In central Japan one hundred villages were researched at the time of their Shinto cult festivals. The results of the study were quite new in regard to religion. Cults could now be understood not from belief or verbal ideals, but, evidently the "seats of Gods" showed their central content as socio-territorial demarcation. The cults were recognized as traditional local constitution, which provides basic structural conditions for the village: socially and politically (founderhouse), spatially (value focussed axis) as well as aesthetically and ontologically (PRO-portion = META-physics) [Egenter 1980, 1994a] *V osrednji Japonski so raziskovali vasi v času "Shinto praznovanja". Kulte lahko na podlagi teh spoznanj razumemo ne le kot verovanje in idealizme, ampak kot temelj gradacije prostora, razmejitve med centrom (središčem božanstva) in ostalimi socialnimi, političnimi, estetskimi in ontološkimi vsebinami.*



Slika 9: One village composed by four hamlets shows the basic conditions of the spatial organisation of a village in the framework of what is called the "cultfestival of the village deity". [Egenter 1982a] *Vas, sestavljena iz štirih delov, prikazuje osnovno organiziranost prostora v okviru vaškega praznovanja.*



Slika 10: Selection of hutlike types in various cultures. *Izbor tipov koč različnih kultur.*



Slika 11: Selection of column types in various cultures. Many of them were considered of highest values, being sacred or representing deities. The Djed pillar of Ancient Egypt for instance was representative for the wellness of the Pharaoh's empire. [Egenter 1980a, 1994a] *Izbor tipov stebrov različnih kultur. Mnogi so bili zelo visoko cenjeni, bodisi da so bili sveti ali so predstvaljali božanstva.*

the expression of security, of commodity, of closeness in the social sense [Egenter 1983, 1990c].

In regard to the concept of "settlement" it is important that nestbuilding and passing the night in nests happens in groups. Evidently there is some sort of a plan reflecting social structure and the defensive character in regard to predators around the night camp. Note that locomotion in arboreal space is difficult at night for the animals: stereoscopic view is blocked to a great extent.

About 16 million years ago space becomes mainly terrestrial for Hominoids in Africa. Nests are dominantly built on the ground. Rooted materials like bamboostalks are knotted and fixed at a height of ca. 2 meters, thus producing a tower like stable construction which on top carries the nest. The animal climbs up and spends the night on top of his construction [Egenter 1983, 2001]. This can be considered as the beginning of architecture.

#### **Semantic Architecture:**

Semantic factor: Essentially from the nest, but also in relation to traffic signs of greater apes [Savage-Rumbaugh 1996] we must assume that building included an increasingly important semantic dimension, the "sign in the landscape" which developed into a particular class of "semantic architecture". It developed functions of socio-territorial control combined with food control. This type of architecture became extremely important for the evolution of human culture.

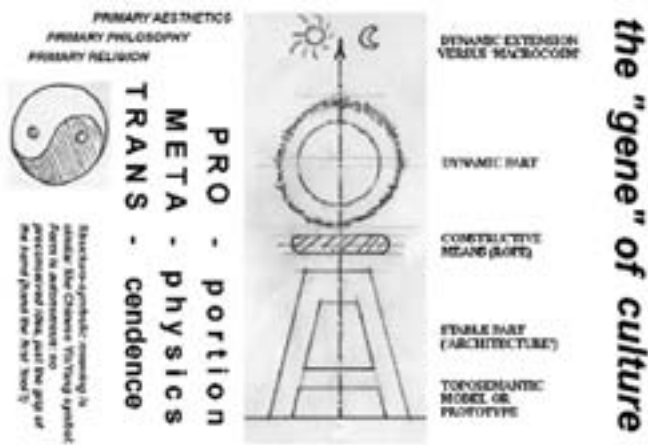
Early tools must have greatly stimulated and differentiated constructive behaviour. Tools allowed to cut materials and transport them somewhere else and combine them with other construction materials. A wide spectrum of forms is possible which we can reconstruct to some extent if we look at the material culture of traditional populations of hunters and collectors. Traps, nets, for animals and fishing, originally small round huts or tents and other small forms, basic means of transport, illumination, fire for cooking and warmth, etc.. In other words, we can assume a considerable equipment which did not show in the archaeological method [Egenter 1991a, 1994b, 2003].

Categorical polarity: Primary aesthetic factor. The most important development in the line of semantic architecture was "categorical polarity". It can be assumed as an autonomous technological development. The human hand forms a lower part by binding rooted stalks into a stable cone. A surplus part is forming a protruding element which remains naturally unbound and mobile. Two contradictive categories in one form. Aesthetically PRO-portion is born. The artificially produced "categorical polarity" can be used to make analogies to similar structures of natural forms (top and trunk of trees, protruding parts of heads (horns, antlers), wings and body of birds, etc. [Egenter 1994a, 1994c]. Did this comparative process of artificial form (semantic architecture) and natural forms contribute to the increasing size of the human brain from Homo habilis to Homo sapiens sapiens (ca. 2 My - 40 Ty). Did it form the "discovery of nature"? Was it the first human system of cognition programmed to form aesthetic harmony?

Polar analogy: We can explain this analogy between two different forms structured according to the principle of "categorical polarity" with the following formula, expressing "polar analogy".

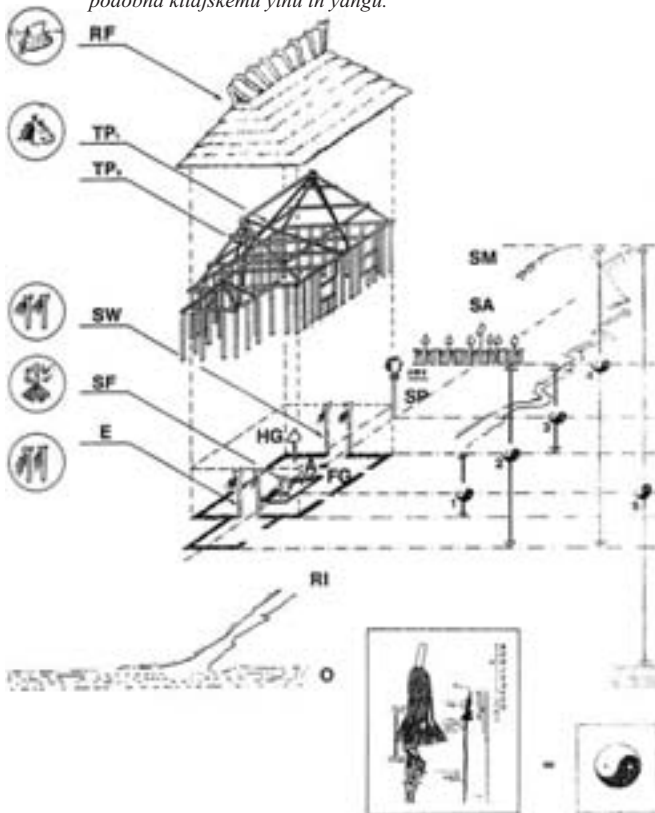
$$O/A1 = O/A2 = O/An.$$

It implies natural or artificial objects 1, 2 ...n which may all be different in their form but which have something in common which makes them similar, quasi identical. It is their categorically



Slika 12: Schematic representation of most important criteria of semantic architecture. The lower rooted part (A) forms a stable cone whereas the upper part (O) remains natural and dynamic, both parts combined acting as a model similar like the Chinese YinYang symbol. In contrast to this abstracted graphic symbol the O/A structure forms a primary local vertical axial system which can be interpreted in spatially extensive ways. If we assume its universality in rural agrarian domains since neolithic times we could consider it some sort of the 'gene of culture' providing the basic structure of art, philosophy and religion.

*Shematski prikaz osnovnega kriterija semantične arhitekture. Spodnji, zakoreninjeni del (A) predstavlja stabilni stožec, medtem ko zgornji del (O) ostaja naraven in dinamičen. Oba simbola sta podobna kitajskemu yinu in yangu.*



Slika 13: Elements of the Ainu House and the evaluation of the landscape. The whole environment is interpreted in the framework of a categorically polar system from inside out, from the domestic domain into the whole valley with the dichotomy of upper river and lower river as main backbone. The whole system is structured according to the sacred signs of the Ainu, the inau.

*Elementi Ainu hiše in njene okolice - celotno okolje je interpretirano s kategoriziranim polarnim sistemom, od znotraj navzven, iz lokalnega na celotno dolino, z delitvijo na zgornjo in spodnjo reko. Sistem je strukturiran skladno s svetimi simboli Ainu - inau.*

contradictive structure, O/A, meaning upper part with dominantly "dynamic" category over lower part with "static" category, both parts forming a formal unit in objects 1, 2 ....n. This common aspect is "harmony between contradicting categories" in their forms. We have shown how this principle is effective e.g. in the Middle Ages and later and how it is misinterpreted by European Art historians [Egenter 1998b\*, c\*, d\*]

**Domestic Architecture**

Evidently this order is not invented by a prehistorical "Einstein". It is derived from models related to semantic architecture. In the case of the Ainu it is very clear: their whole society, their social, formal, spatial, aesthetic, religious, economical dimensions are structured into an enormously complex system of polar relations. "Coincidence of opposites" in the same form, in the same conceptual unit. Spatial, tectonic, architectural, or colour related on one hand, but also social, sexual or cosmic on the other side. Harmony regarding light and dark, regarding above and below, natural and artificial and so on. The whole environment with all its empirically and spiritually accessible parts is combined into a per/conceptual whole which is modelled according to sacred signs which express topos, verticality and categorical polarity at that place [Egenter 1991a].

Similarly in the case of the Japanese farmhouse. Semantic architecture defines the main points of the house, altar and entrance. The altar defines the upper part. Ritual behaviour, living and sleeping are focused on it. And the lower part with its pragmatic aspects of daily life like cooking and other work is related to the gate markers or also special markers for the hearth and the later established sacred column in the centre of the house. Note that in spite of considerable variations this basic pattern is common to all house traditions in Japan [Egenter 1982b, 1991b].

**Sedentary Architecture: settlement core complex**

In Neolithic times semantic architecture developed into a very important system which supported sedentary life by a new disposition, which we called "settlement core complex". Core complex is a new function of semantic architecture on the higher level of settlement or village. Demarcation is initially set up by a founder at the borderline between wilderness and intended plantation surfaces. Nuclear border means its polar code is projected outwards. It defines the "sacred territoriality" of the settlement, the functional and non-functional use of the surfaces and socially the power structure related to the founderhouse. Its representant is chief of the village, head priest (owner of deity; deity = demarcation sign) and - with his kin - ruler of the territory. The local festival calendar is the archive of village history. The most important criteria of this system are the toposemantic dimension of the fibroconstructive signs, their cyclic cultic reproduction and the structuro-symbolic form of the nuclear border marker ("semantic architecture").

Categorical polarity of the demarcation was used as a model to organise time, plantation cycles, organisation of work, etc. as we can see it in the example of the Ainu. Due to its model function for environmental order, its aesthetic and harmonising significance in general, it produced high values. It became sacred or was called "above" implying high ontological ("worldview") values (e.g. in Japanese: "kami", high above, which, in contact with other cultures became "deity" or "god").

Thus, this system of "nuclear borders" was highly effective because demarcations were within the settlement, thus protected. In its performance, that is, by developing high values, it managed to guarantee the existence and diffusion of sedentary agrarian



village cultures in many different parts of the world.

The concept of categorical polarity became the allround method to harmonise artificial arrangements as well as the organisation of natural environments. On one hand, the cyclic renewal of the demarcation set up initially at village foundation by the village founder produced local time, the "once" of the foundation reinstated and physically enewed at the cyclic festival. And it brought social hierarchy: the representative of the founderhouse became local ruler and priest at the cyclic rite as "owner of the deity".

In other words, "semantic architecture" and how it is used in certain conditions lets us reconstruct the process of the formation not only of agrarian society, but also of its important characteristics, like religious rites, "mythical time", "creation of (local) world by gods", formation of social hierarchy and so on. What we called "settlement core complex" must have formed the nucleus of a cultural system which we perceive in neolithic and metal periods as general characteristics of widespread sedentary village cultures.

***Urban architecture: early city-states (monumentalisation of fibrous village cultures)***

We can also reconstruct how this 'settlement core complex' was used in the formation of earliest city-states and their hierarchical social structure. We can understand the role played by monumentalised temples for social control and centralisation. We can understand the formation of earliest script based on semantic architecture [Egenter 1984, 1989f\*]. But this transition is not discussed here. It is outlined in various other papers, e.g. in: "Rural/urban dichotomy" 1998g\*. The basic new insight consists in the fact that the culture of early civilisations were not the great ingenious inventions as described by historians, art historians and archaeologists (e.g. Spiro Kostoff 1977). The developments can rather be characterised as a superseding process in which the new upper social class materially transformed or "monumentalised" the "fibroconstructive" non-durable culture of agrarian villages of neolithic and metal age origins. The new durable elements were transformed into instruments to exploit the agrarian population and to control extended surfaces from central temple systems (sacrifice transformed into tax).

In the following we will show some examples of our new systematic approach. We will indicate the interaction, the close relation between "semantic architecture" and "domestic architecture" (or "vernacular architecture").

***Conclusion***

In contrast to the conventional method of the anthropologist who works ethnographically in the field surveying a traditional society, using interviews of the inhabitants of a house or a village to obtain explanations for the forms of their vernacular architecture, we have outlined a different concept which reconstructs the architectural forms and their expression as an immanent principle of the deeprooted architectural tradition itself. It is basically a physically expressed aesthetic principle which is autonomous in its origins (categorical polarity) and is traditionally preserved in many forms and expressions because of its harmonious model character. This might change the way we understand vernacular forms and their expressions.

In our first part we have critically discussed conventional interpretations of anthropology. We questioned the assumption that socio-cultural concepts were basic, that symbolisms related to the human body or gender were primary. We doubted Eliade's proposition that microcosmic interpretations were mini-

aturisations of macrocosmic experiences. We also doubted that such results of interviews might be taken as culturo-specific expressions and metaphors. This attitude is not aware of the cognitive processes involved. How is natural form perceived and integrated into human consciousness? The conventional anthropologist considers nature as a primarily given entity. (1)

If however we are assuming a deep rooted constructive tradition, a "soft prehistory" which did not manifest itself in our conventional system of prehistory, things look different. All these often phantastic vernacular forms are not just "symbolic arrangements" or particularly "decorated" types in the conventional Western sense of art theory anymore. They are rather traditional "survivals" in the sense of surviving formal concepts, survivals of a "pre-monumental" architectural substrate that was materially not durable and therefore went through the meshes of our historical perception. Forms of the semantic level have been preserved into the domestic level, even though material conditions or constructive capacities in general have greatly changed. Or, a particular form of semantic architecture had gained an important meaning within a cult system (e.g. founder's cult, ancestor cult), therefore the symbolic core was kept intact while new functional parts were added.

Such survivals can also be most impressive if the texture of a durable object still preserves the primary fibroconstructive conditions as part of a building constructed with more evolved materials and building techniques. This can be seen in many parts of the world and on various technical levels. It is the case if the texture has become an indicator of the primary condition of the form and wants to communicate the value of this stage. (2)

One of the most impressive cases are the stave churches of Northern Europe which, besides their impressive PRO-portions, show rich "decorations" of weaving work in their columns as well as in their doors and door frames. The same principle of textural survival appears also in the "cannelura" of Greek columns. The well-known texture has preserved the structural condition of long gone times when such columns were still used as free standing symbols and reed bundles [Semper 1878, Andrae 1930, 1933]. Note that the interpretation of the capital changes completely. It has nothing to do with support in the static sense. It is primary an ontological model showing the harmony of two contrasting parts, what we called categorical polarity or PRO-portion. Similarly the bundle-pillars of ancient Egypt tell us clearly that they were copied from fibroconstructive prototypes. Evidently they are not 'inventions' of designers as Spiro Kostoff maintained. Their prototypes have to be searched in predynastic village cultures. They were cyclically rebuilt fibrous columns very likely serving as topo-semantic markers in the framework of local cults in which their character as ontological model played a role [Egenter 1994a]. Highly trained sculptors working for the 'eternally durable' buildings of the Egyptian pharaohs have monumentalised them and integrated them into temples.

Similarly the nicely decorated plant columns or other types of structures associated with many Indonesian house traditions are related to the territorial founder system. Some have remained fibroconstructive and outside the houses being used in the framework of cultic traditions, or have changed materiality and were moved into the house in the case of ancient founder families. It would be an important task to gather materials on this topic. Cults and rites still performed among various ethnic groups in Southeast Asia showing "semantic architecture" in their core should urgently be studied. Anthropologists have greatly neglected these materials either because they had been devalued by christian influences (fetish, spirit hut etc.) or for reasons of



time. Studying the festival calendar of a traditional society implies living with them during at least one or a couple of years [Egenter 1994a].

Thus, all these "symbolisms" are not "invented" as some interviews in conventional anthropology may suggest. Evidently they are part of a very deeprooted tradition, which has developed its own ontological values over long times. These values can be "read" by studying local cyclic rituals. Sacred demarcations within or outside the house are ritually renewed. But, why are they so valuable for local peoples? Since neolithic times they became important in regard to sedentary life. Agrarian society began to accumulate wealth, developed village culture. As part of a territorial system the demarcations protect the agrarian habitat by serving as a socio-toposemantic archive of the local past and of local social power. [Egenter 1980, 1982, 1994a, b]

Consequently, all these symbolisms have their clear immanent logic providing a basic order for daily life of a family, of several families or of a larger sedentary group. The main purpose of this order is to express harmony, to provide an ideal model for harmonious relations. And - contrary to what many, indoctrinated with European cultural values might think, these symbolisms are not "simple" or "primitive". There is a very clear and harmonious overall concept behind all this. It could even be considered as an important philosophical system. It supports a worldview in which "all is one, and one is all" in regard to aesthetic and ontological harmony ("Hen kai pan" in ancient Greece).

Vernacular architecture was composed to express harmony from smallest details to larger units and the whole. Vernacular settlements were composed in view of expressing harmony from the intimate environment of the house, the habitat to the larger units of a valley or a region. We become aware of a great importance of tradition in the physical sense. There is a shocking continuity in many things which we are not aware, because our analytical mind has lost the capacity to read categorically polar traditions. Western concepts of absolute spirituality and other rationalisms are projected on other cultures (3). Maybe we still have this need for a harmonious continuity within ourselves. Is it not surprising how modern urban people still feel at ease in traditional vernacular architecture? Rural tourism even searches for such conditions, whereas, on the other hand, many feel frustrated in rational modern environments. Is there a fundamental difference because modern spaces are universalistic, rationalistic, devoted to homogeneous space concepts?

Are human beings of the future prepared to live in the homogeneous space of physics, of the universe? Are we pleased with the space concepts modern architects and urbanists borrowed from astronomy and physics? Or should we try again to understand the human heritage, the categorically polar and harmonious expression of vernacular architecture? Are we happy with the uniform geometry type of skyscrapers and skylines rationalistically deformed architects project into our cities and villages? Or do we want to rediscover the traditional way of harmonising architectural forms as a model of balanced human lives? If we discover that architecture to a great extent created man and culture, there might be reasonable motives for studying vernacular architecture more seriously than this is done today.

Approximately 30 additional illustrated examples accompanying this article and one chapter are available on author's Internet site Implosion:  
[http://home.worldcom.ch/~negenter/000\\_BorutAnthroHouse/Borut\\_HTx\\_E02z\\_ZZZ3.html](http://home.worldcom.ch/~negenter/000_BorutAnthroHouse/Borut_HTx_E02z_ZZZ3.html)

The complete article with all illustrations can be found with the URL:  
[http://home.worldcom.ch/~negenter/000\\_Borut\\_Intro.html](http://home.worldcom.ch/~negenter/000_Borut_Intro.html)

## Opombe / Notes

- 1 Waterson (1990) for instance projects a wide range of naturalistic concepts on the Indonesian house to make it "living". But what if women gained their ideas about the womb in analogy to some storehouse or loft? Evidently there is no etymology in anthropology, we can not provide evidence. But in Indo-European etymology there are many words which we take for granted in regard to their naturalistic physical background, but then might be fairly surprised if we become aware of their technical origins.
- 2 Unfortunately the art historians had no understanding for this ergological condition of form. They often invented speculative terminologies which covered up insights into the fibrous prototypes of monumental forms (Gottfried Semper 1878 and Walter Andrae 1930, 1933).
- 3 There is a tremendous continuity in human ways to structure space in categorically polar ways. There are a lot of examples in our premodern world which still reflect categorical polarity of space organisation. Surprisingly the churches have conserved the horizontal polarity scheme in most elementary and pure ways: the spatial unit of the community in the nave is defined by the altar on one side and by the gate or entrance facade on the other side. This scheme focused on some ontological value appears also slightly varied in many other types of institutional spaces, like throne-hall, court, concert hall, theatre, etc. . Historical cities like Paris or Rome have preserved categorical polarity in their value focussed axial systems, e.g. the "Champs Elisees" which focussed on the Louvre (or, the monastery behind) having its most recent "accumulation" in "La Defense" [Frey 1947, Egenter 1998d\*].

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