ARCHITECTURE AS MEDIUM IN THE HISTORY OF HUMAN SPACE: 
THE COSMIC, ARCHITECTONIC AND SEMIOTIC

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The intention of this short paper is to present an idea about different 
ways architecture can participate as a medium of culture. These 
differences appear to be most associated with, or may actually enable, 
major historical changes in cultural processes. It must be clear from the 
beginning that I am speaking only about those meanings of architectural 
form which are expressive, not things which have to do with way-
finding, perceptual or visual aesthetics, task performance, simpler forms 
of territoriality, climate, technology or economy.

Since the first purpose of the expressive might be said to be the 
construction of vast associational linkages in cognition, rather than some 
more external use as in the case of other purposes of form, the cultural 
question of how to build these symbolically based infrastructures in the 
mind will always involve media strategies. This is much less the issue 
with other uses of form where the choice of physical medium is more 
predetermined by the actual intended use. While the origins of 
expressive form are undoubtedly closely tied to social purposes, the core 
values which evolve over long periods of time, at least in traditional 
societies, become more independent from any present time social reality. 
In this sense, core values are seen as a corpus of "pure belief", powerful 
symbolism which will be manipulated by real individuals and groups.
In addition to development of core values over time, actual physical expressive "texts" or "events", in particular media, will have characteristics which to some degree determine their accessibility for manipulation by individual or social agents. McLuhan certainly recognized and probably oversold the idea of "media criticality" in the "messages" of expressive culture (McLuhan e.g. 1964). His concern with essential differences between oral, printed and electronic media, however, appears to have missed a much more significant, historically profound series of media effects, speaking in terms of both "cognitive construction" and actual expressive events.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous aspect of human expression is the structuring of meaning into oppositions. Virtually any examination of a culturally traditional expressive "event", whether a work of art, a myth, a ritual performance, etc. will reveal an often complex structure founded on oppositional sets. These are the basic core values of the culture which are being manipulated in the expressive "event" for some real social, political, economic, or strictly psychological purpose. For some time now, I have attempted to present a point of view which, unlike Levi Straussian assumptions of structural innateness, places much more emphasis on an external medium for both structural and ritual effectiveness, an idea which is central to the present paper. This logic rests on the argument that much of the structure and effect found in various expressive texts comes not exclusively from inherent, oppositional tendencies of the mind, but is to an important degree dependent on cognitive "results" of spatial/environmental experience (Doxtater 1984, 1989).

If one can show that patterns of oppositions in for example origin myths, folktales, textile art, or ceremonial pottery can be traced to fundamental spatial concepts of symbolism—the core values of the society—we can then at least hypothesize the need for a "medially" facilitated spatial experience as a foundation to expression. Then when historical processes change media, it may be possible to observe the effect of such changes on expressive processes and culture itself. Changes in the "master medium" of architecture should produce major effects in society's ability to develop, maintain, and manipulate core values.

The "Cosmic"

The term "cosmic" refers to those societies where long periods of cultural and environmental continuity have produced very formal symbolic conceptions of space. Most of us are familiar with the symbolic directions and ritual importance of axial contact between opposed domains, as in the "sacred" spaces of a Christian church. Developing and
manipulating meanings of "spirit/human" or "male/female", these are core values which underlie other, non-spatial expressive texts. While in contemporary societies, we see only isolated islands of such formal uses of spatial symbolism, in smaller scale, more traditional groups, these conceptions inform virtually all built and natural settings at a complexity of scales; they function to maintain some total social organization.

In primitive societies symbolic space very similar in effect to that of the church can be ritually laid out on a natural landscape—apparently with no architectural contribution required. Nevertheless in virtually all of these same small groups, the domestic dwelling and probably the settlement will at the same time be microcosmic in their plan forms. These sites are always the locus of important rituals, usually in relationship to powerful cosmically defined natural sites of the gods. Furthermore, it is also quite likely that particularly the dwelling form, given its geometry and intensive use, provides a unique contribution to the cognitive construction of the spatial symbolism.

Under these conditions it is primarily the structural aspects of expression so important to ritual process which the architectural medium provides. Unlike later church examples of cosmic space, the object-like images which architectural form can potentially contribute, are in simpler societies extremely plain. Decorative detail often connotes geometric, "structural" importance and is located at important ritual positions, particularly thresholds and centers. Iconic symbolism is often temporary and only placed on the architecture during ritual performance. In smaller egalitarian societies, perhaps, where cosmic expression might be said to be most "pure", there can be no stylistic manipulation of the overall architectural form or details. Because of the very powerful structural component which the architectural medium provides, more individually motivated images of style or status are highly constrained. Any potential attachment of meaning to the form, beyond the ancient, shared, structural definition of core values which the spatial layout of the architecture provides, will be carefully controlled by legitimate members of participant social groups. Ritual usage of all cosmic sites will be highly proscribed.

Hierarchical control of sacred cosmic sites, particularly the "architecturalization" of all-powerful natural ritual places, can be used to develop and control highly organized civilizations such as in ancient Egypt or Mesoamerica. Though much more decorated than in more primitive societies, the role of the architectural medium is still focused on the provision of symbolic structure and ritual performance. Decoration remains associated with significant spatial positions where meaning is effectively changed during ritual. Though architectural historians will
describe such architectural form in terms of style, from the point of view of the cultural participant, stylistic meaning does not seem to operate as it does today to provide individual or group status vis-a-vis others, or to express a particular philosophy.

The "Architectonic"

Historically, at least two things can happen to these "supernovas" of cosmic expression as they attempt to maintain the legitimacy of increasingly large scales of social organization. First, they can subsume other culturally different groups, and second, they can collapse. In both cases, smaller groups emerge which are closed and corporate, like many peasant societies defined by anthropologists. These small societies are either fortifying their expressive culture from the surrounding colonialist power, or reconstituting it from the debris of more organized forms.

In the first instance of the take-over of a usually smaller and foreign culture, we find the frequent fusion of the intrusive cosmos with the local indigenous one, as in the case of the Christian church with natural or architectural sites of Scandinavia (Doxtater 1990a) or the New World. Such composite uses of the architectural medium do serve to legitimize relationships between masters and indigenous populations. Still, within the newly formed corporate groups themselves, use of the traditional cosmos will naturally be outlawed, leaving a sort of expressive vacuum in the daily life of these small scale communities.

A similar denial of the powerful traditional conceptions of space and symbolism—and the ability to make contact with the spiritual world—may also occur in the wake of the collapse of highly organized forms among groups with a common culture. In this case, cosmic symbolism and its exaggerated forms of ceremonialism will have a negative association. In each situation, the primary way to control the expressive and hence social power of the alien cosmos—particularly in smaller domestic scales apart from the syncretized temples or churches—is to prohibit or eliminate prior ritual sites. The strategy for the intrusive power is to build over such places, while in collapsed situations the alternative might be to move away from sites used previously for more complex scale organization.

Obviously these resultant communities are either being denied or are themselves denying certain aspects of their traditional expressive culture. Most important for our purposes here, they can no longer perform ritual in traditional, all-powerful natural sites, nor can they overtly use the architectural medium to structure and replace these communal rites. Ritual within the dwellings themselves is also circumspect, particularly in its developmental contribution to cosmic symbolism and structure. In
short, these groups of people are faced with the loss of the medium (both landscape and architectural) which since ancient times has developed, maintained and been used to manipulate the core beliefs of their religion.

It is presently hypothesized that these historic conditions do not alleviate the need for spatially based cultural expression to influence social relations within the closed communities, and that essential changes are made both in the medium of expression and in the way of making those messages socially effective. These new forms of expression emerge indigenously within each closed community independently, and are accordingly limited to this scale. It may be that the smaller closed communities manage to maintain essential core oppositions without the highly formal concepts of directional symbolism, the symbolic images which inform these structures, or the overt ritual manipulation of axial places of contact with the world of spirits.

Though potential in all scales of space, cosmic expressive systems were more independent of everyday social experience and relied upon the architectural medium primarily for structuring of symbolic content and the ritual manipulation of such. In subsequent closed communities, without access to overt symbols and cosmological structuring media, it is as if the structuralist cores are transformed directly into social form. In these usually egalitarian communities, the relationships themselves between individual families and the group of families become, in effect, their symbols.

Perhaps at least one form of expressive medium remains available in these conditions. The less outwardly conspicuous use of folklore within the community probably attempts, at least initially, to maintain the cosmic symbolism and structure previously developed, maintained and manipulated primarily by ritual and architecture. Yet if our previous assumption of the importance of ritual spatial experience to all expressive forms is correct, then presumably folklore would loose much of its expressive effect.

It may be possible to show that when closed corporate groups form, radical changes in architectural form will occur. The primary causes of these changes will not be traceable to reasons of defense, economics, and the like, but can be understood as a response to limitations of cosmic forms of expression. These societies effect a major change in the medium which traditionally has provided the spatial-structural component to their beliefs. These societies now use the total "architectonic" form, not the cardinal formalities of architecture and opposed symbolic domains, to define spatially separated and opposed symbolic groups such as the family and the community. These oppositions, which still may have strong folkloric associations with the core values of the cosmic past, are primarily dependent upon an intensity of daily social life for their
efficacy. Daily activity is in this sense self-legitimizing. It not only symbolizes the egalitarian balance between the individual and the collective, but it accomplishes economic and political results as well.

Thus we begin to look somewhat differently at the closed "peasant" community. These are not groups of people who simply manage to maintain their social continuity and equality because they live so intimately with each other. Nor, perhaps, do such purported concepts of "limited good" provide the major explanation of their really remarkable social stability. Certainly these individuals reciprocate for numerous economic, educational, kinship, and even purely psychological reasons. Yet the assumption that close network ties alone can ensure long term continuity, not only radically underestimates perhaps universal expressive needs—especially in egalitarian groups—but fails to recognize what may be one of the historical changes in expressive media and effect.

One might also speculate that the architectonic effect may also be possible in portions of larger mostly historical urban settings where the cosmic system has either been isolated and controlled by some elite, or it has for other reasons broken down. We might also ask whether this more subtle form of expressive structuralism, still based on spatial experience but devoid of overt symbolism and ritual manipulation of axial "contact", can exist in more contemporary architectural form. It may today be possible that architectonic form can be effective in legitimizing either egalitarian or hierarchical kinds of social relationships, yet perhaps only in rare cases where some "prior" expressive ethos might exist, e.g. in the family dwelling or white-collar work setting. Again, the assumed contribution of the medium of architecture is structural, here, as oppositions between parents and children, or executives/individuals and staff/group.

The "Semiotic"

While small, relatively isolated examples of both the cosmic and architectonic uses of the architectural medium do survive into the present, these more traditional cultural uses probably account for a minor portion of architectural meaning today. To a large extent, architectural and settlement form have lost their ability to spatially structure human cultural expression; most of our natural and built environment cannot be controlled by either small egalitarian communities or more hierarchical political and economic groups. The repetitive intensity of environmental experience necessary to establish either cosmic or architectonic structure is difficult in our transient, electronically aspatial way of living. Much of our physical settings become instead, territorial and political. In this
situation, the "medium" of architecture becomes most useful as a sign of identity, occupation or territorial power. It is also true that other causes of form become more dominant, again, way-finding, visual aesthetics, and task-performance in addition to the more "ecological" purposes of climate, technology, and economy.

Theoretically, this latter and historically emergent use of architectural expression is antithetical to either the cosmic or architectonic uses in their more traditional forms. In totally indigenous structural uses of space and architecture, at least at smaller scales, the medium simply cannot be available for more individual, conscious, competitive expression. Any structuralist use of architecture, whether for egalitarian or hierarchical purposes, must spring from shared values and common experiences, not "individual" demands for territory. Here too, many questions need to be formed about the historical events and processes which may have allowed the inclusion or outright shift from the cosmic or architectonic to the "semiotic".

The term really has two meanings as used here. First is the way in which this use of architectural form may expressively legitimize social territories in terms of identity, status, or philosophy. Certainly architecture is the largest potential form of territorial sign. In this sense architecture becomes more sign-like in a less ritual or spatially structuralist use of the term "semiotic". There is an absence of structuralist or spatially cognitive potential in the sign which exists more as an independent node and must be attached to actual social territory. Furthermore this does not mean that the relationship between an architectural image and its meaning must be sign-like and not symbol-like in the conventional distinction between signs and symbols. It is assumed that any, more arbitrary image may be used to associate identity, status or philosophy with some social occupant. Certainly many of these meanings will tend to be more directly and obviously understood, in contrast to extremely abstract symbolism which requires much more extensive processes of association.

The second aspect of the use of the term "semiotic" refers to its often implicit emphasis on signs which are meaningful within a particular medium. Here we must be careful to distinguish not only a shift in meaning of the term "medium", but of also different connotations of "structure". It may be useful to think of the structuring role of architecture in the cosmic and architectonic as providing—via spatial experience—cognitive structure for positioned symbolic meanings which can really occur in a variety of media, e.g. language, art, sculpture, kinesthetics, etc (Doxtater 1980). Earlier in the present paper I used the term "master medium" to refer to this actually multi-medial role of architecture in the cosmic and architectonic. Again the essence of this
unusual multi-medial effect is the way architecture can use spatial experience to internally group, separate, and make ritually effective symbolism from a variety of physical media. It has also been noted that during these phases the form of architecture itself is more limited to the socially controlled spatial structural contribution, and cannot function as a specific physical medium itself.

When architectural form becomes semiotic, however, in terms of the present definition, it looses its prior spatial capacity and seems to play only the role of a specific physical medium. Thus architecture becomes more like other specific media, and we naturally turn particularly to the metaphor of language to talk about meaning. We also use the term “syntax” to refer to underlying relational structures of signs. This is a form of intramedial structuralism which intends no spatial, experiential aspect but refers only to relationships within medium images such as a building facade or a larger urban image.

An Ethnographic Example: "Pueblo" Expression

Though more egalitarian, the religious system of the Anasazi—ancestors of the historical pueblos of the Southwest U.S.—was quite similar to the also cosmologically dependent civilizations in Mexico. The peak of the Anasazi “supernova” occurred about 1150 AD with the completion of large community structures in Chaco Canyon at the center of the region. Figure 1 illustrates first, the basic Anasazi settlement pattern of community structure surrounded by family homesteads, and second, how cosmic conceptions of symbolic axes and ritual means of contact with the ancestral or spirit world were used to legitimate and organize a very large and complex cultural region (Doxtater, 1990b). While space does not permit a fuller discussion of how cosmic symbolism might have
worked in daily and ceremonial life of the Chacoan Anasazi, one only
has to look at detailed accounts of Historical Pueblo ceremonialism
(Doxtater 1978, Ortiz 1969, Saile 1977). Core symbolic values were
conceptualized in terms of directional axes which informed dwelling
interiors, ceremonial kivas, the orientation of the pueblo, and certainly
the natural ritual landscape.

Apparently, however, the active presence of cosmic systems in many
of the Historical Pueblo groups, at least until the earlier part of this
century, suggests a reliance of this form of expression since Anasazi times.
Yet the fact that the Anasazi didn't live in large pueblos like their
historical descendent calls attention to the radical change in form
which occurred during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, after the
Chacoan collapse. During classical Chacoan times, when the cosmic
systems were at their peak, people still lived in non-contiguous, loosely
aggregated homesteads, with communal ritual places of cosmic contact
taking place in specialized community kiva sites and out in nature.
When the entire system of scales of social organization became too large,
perhaps, or overly ceremonial with little economic or political reality to
serve, the system collapses to previous levels.

In many areas out in the previously Chacoan World, groups pick up
and move to new territories. Perhaps a major reason for leaving
established tribal areas—there is no intrusive or offensive threat from
other cultural groups during this period—is because the old cosmic ritual
sites associated with the Chacoan supernova can no longer be comfortably
used. A distaste with the excesses of cosmic ceremonialism per se may
also have existed. It is at this time and perhaps for these reasons, then,
that we see the most radical changes in the architectural medium. The
new forms which emerge, figure 2, are remarkable in their sense of
experimentation with above all, the effects of the architectonic.
Perhaps for the first time among the Pueblo peoples, architectural form is being used to define the entire community and its now more collapsed, isolated social organization. Formerly non-contiguous dwellings become tightly contiguous, almost urban, truly "pueblo" forms. Yet no defensive need existed, and ecologically life was very similar to before.

Gone are the prominent ceremonial structures at the center of the aggregation of dwellings; now, open plazas seem to take their place. Specific sites of cosmic axial contact are replaced by the quasi-natural plaza whose meaning may have been built by more subtle, purely social forms of symbolism. Yet certainly the ancient cosmic traditions with their subconscious spatial structures would have persisted in other expressive forms: mythology, pottery, textiles, etc. Thus one might explain the eventual reemergence of overt cosmic symbolism and ritual, though limited in scale. This may be especially true in the Hopi and Zuni where settlement forms have perhaps lost more of the post-collapse architectonic form than elsewhere.

The Rio Grande Pueblos, on the other hand, may have kept more architectonic aspects of expression, because of greater external control, and prohibitions of the cosmic from the other cultures which spatially and politically have surrounded their pueblos. More recently, because of political and economic competition with Non-Native American neighbors, they have been forced to express their cultural identity in ways unknown in the majority of their cosmic or architectonic past. The term "semiotic" becomes helpful in distinguishing these new uses of the architectural medium with their essentially different effect. Whether the highly publicized tourist images of Taos or Acoma, or designed images of Santa Fe, the pueblo style is a form of expressive use of architecture seldom if ever used indigenously within the Pueblo culture.
It is quite possible that the semiotic use of architectural form for purposes of territorial identity, status or philosophy only occurs either when cosmic or architectonic definitions of human space break down, or when the closed architectonic communities live close to other cultures. The use of pueblo (Santa Fe) style images does not correspond to the meanings of particular spaces within some socio-culturally defined system of space--as in the cosmic or architectonic. Expressions of identity or status in contemporary societies are not closely tied to shared ritual experience between groups, e.g. family and community, within some inclusive cultural entity. In traditional cultures, identity and status may be said to be conferred or legitimized by the larger community, its core values and the ritual manipulation of such. However, in composite or technological societies "legitimacy" is more dependent upon the political or territorial power of individuals or exclusive groups, and of course the force of law.

References

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