

Anthropological View of Architecture: An Alternative Approach to Study Human Environments

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ABSTRACT

Architectural descriptions mostly focus on the material aspects of a building with relatively little said about the social life of the people who inhabit architecture. In recent decades, many architects and anthropologists have begun to connect architectural works with the development of social and cultural anthropology. The term “architectural anthropology” has been suggested to describe the interrelation between humans and their built environment. Based on historical documents, this paper outlines the development of architectural anthropology and aims to illustrate how this approach can help us to understand the relation between people, their ideas of the world and the creation of a sustainable built environment.

Keywords: *Architectural Anthropology, Built Environment*

1. INTRODUCTION

The built environment in which we live is one of the major factors that structure our lives. Architecture is more than a shelter, it is a domain in which people dwell, work, worship, socialize and ritualize in and around signified places. In fact, architecture can be considered as a primary constituent of social bonds and is an important artifact for symbolic, ritual, artistic and political expression. As it reflects and influences the cosmologies and ideologies of people in different cultures, architecture has always been important to cultural anthropology.

Research on architecture is unavoidably related to the people who build and use it. However, the history and theory of architecture is based on restricted knowledge. Some research focuses only on the physical aspects of built form, such as construction techniques, environmental conditions, resources and technology, while others are concerned with spatial organization, symbolism and the historical style and

aesthetic values of architecture. The relationship between the socio-cultural organization of people and the built environment has been largely ignored in architectural history and theory. In addition, most anthropological descriptions have shown little attention to the constructive behavior or materiality of buildings. However, folk tradition represents the direct and unself-conscious translation into physical form of culture, its needs and values, as well as the desires, dreams, and passions of a people. It expresses the worldview and the ideal environment of a people expressed in built forms and environments (Rappoport, 1969).

In past decades architecture had come to be viewed as a discipline that closely connects to anthropology as both architects and anthropologists have begun to concern themselves with indigenous architecture. By emphasizing the theoretical significance of domestication as an intellectual, political and sociological process, several anthropological works have been of interest to architectural society. They

maintain the idea that architectural theory has to be widened by integrating it into an anthropological framework. Thus, the term *architectural anthropology* has been proposed to explain the bridge between these two disciplines. (Jones, 1996, p. 22-5). In some sense, *architectural anthropology* can be described as a field of study in which scholars from various disciplines, including anthropology, architecture and history of architecture, can make contributions towards understanding better how to tackle the complex problems of sustainability and ecological architecture. Perceptions and interpretations of the built form as part of social processes as well as investigations on the evolution of human culture related to their built environment can contribute to cultural adaptation to climate change. Even though, an anthropological approach to architecture appears as a complex, many-sided field and takes disarticulated forms with a wide array of topics, its main focus is to investigate how the built form is culturally defined and constructed. With the help of insights from the related disciplines, *architectural anthropology* can better serve to understand, describe, and represent human worldviews embodied in different built environments and socio-cultural contexts as we grapple with the challenges of sustainability as a global society.

2. THE STUDY OF ARCHITECTURE WITH AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW

The most pioneering works in architectural anthropology date back at least to Lewis H. Morgan's 1881 *House and House-life of the American Aborigines*, considered a forerunner in the investigation of social factors that influence dwellings. Based considerably on ethnography, Morgan identifies different "social usages and customs" which determine the form of the "long houses" of the tribes in aboriginal America, and emphasizes that the built form and its construction techniques can be represented as a "container" of social units (Morgan, 1965 first published in 1881). Cultural influence on building form can originate in symbolic conceptions. Notions of the right order of relationships within the social and the cosmic universe can play an active role in the building of a house, determining the manner of execution of details in its construction or its position relative to the cardinal points. Griaule and Dieterian's analysis of the shelters of Dogon in Mali is a seminal work

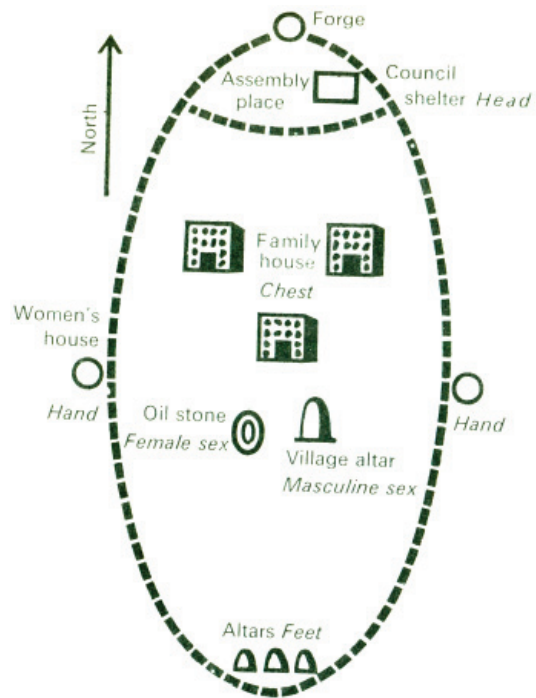


Figure 1:
Ellipsoid Model of the Dogon Settlement Griaule and Dieterian, (1954).

which goes back to the 1930s. They demonstrate how a very complex cosmology is expressed in an esoteric anthropomorphism which informs the layout of houses and settlements, and determines their built forms (Griaule and Dieterian, 1954).

Marcel Mauss' work provides inspiration for architectural study with sociological and cultural perspectives, illuminating the interconnection between the Eskimos' cosmological ideas and their geographical determination, drawing on the evidence of large body of ethnographic data (Mauss, 1979 first published in 1950). From his analysis, Mauss suggests that human geographical factors should be read in relation to the influences of the socio-cultural context of the particular society. Moreover, he demonstrates that a single well-conceived and executed case study is sufficient to establish a general principle. Ethnographies, such as Mauss', demonstrate the interconnections between materials and the social and symbolic space of indigenous architecture, but have been curiously neglected by academic architecture. As Janet Carsten and

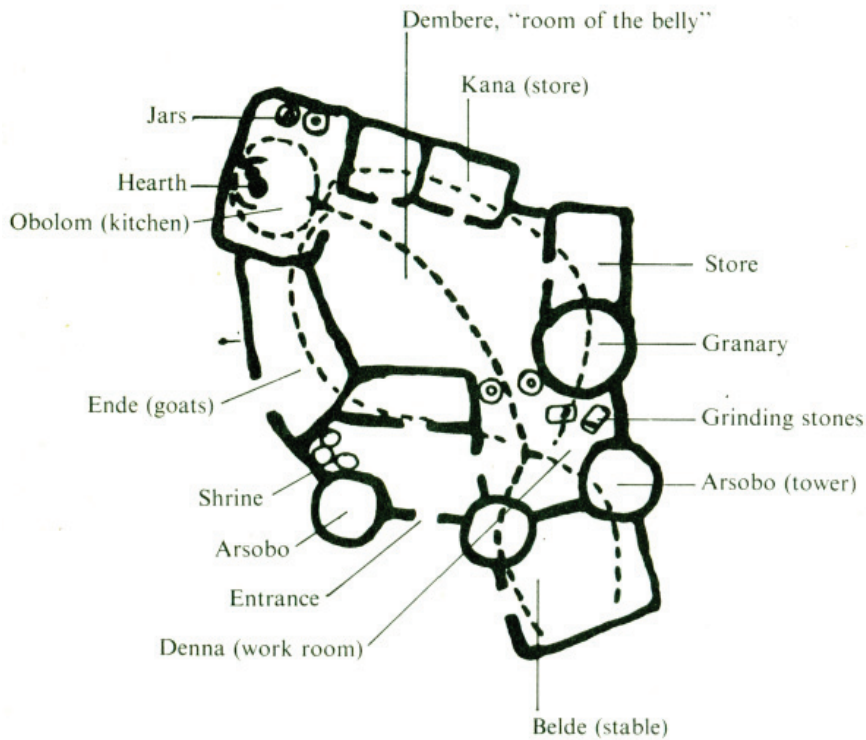


Figure 2:
A Sketch Plan of the Dogon Large House Griaule and Dieterian, (1954).

Stephen Hugh-Jones criticize, "one important reason is that they are so commonplace, so familiar, so much a part of the way things are, that we hardly seem to notice them" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995, p. 4). Beyond this view, Caroline Humphrey suggests that the study of vernacular architecture and its related built environment should not be viewed just for their physical features; instead "they tend to be thought of as cases of socio-cultural symbolism or cosmology rather than subjects in their own right" (Humphrey, 1988, p.16).

A major contribution in the understanding of meaning in architectural forms has been accomplished by Amos Rappoport in *House Form and Culture* (1960). According to him, the meanings of things are derived from the way in which human's define things around them. The meanings do not actually reside in the things, but they develop from the way people want their environment to mean certain things, which include almost everything built by humans since they first started to build. The interpretations of things functions under the "physical determinism" of modifying factors such as climate, material,

construction technique, economy, belief and religion. In this view, architecture is clearly determined by the relation between people and their specific socio-cultural complex (Rappoport 1960).

Slightly later than Rappoport's work, Levi Strauss in his important paper "Do Dual Organizations Exist?" (1963) suggested the idea of analysing human settlement patterns. His essay provided an initial inspiration for later literature in anthropological analysis of the spatial organization of domestic architecture, such as the works of Cunningham (1964), Bourdieu (1973), and Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995). A prime example of the symbolic interpretation of traditional house forms is the much-quoted analysis of the Atoni house accomplished by Cunningham and the Berber house by Bourdieu. In Cunningham's description, the relation between spatial arrangement, construction details, and the use of space, as well as socio-political and cosmological plurality has been analyzed in systematic way. It justifies that a house can be one of the best modes available to preliterate society to store and encapsulate ideas.

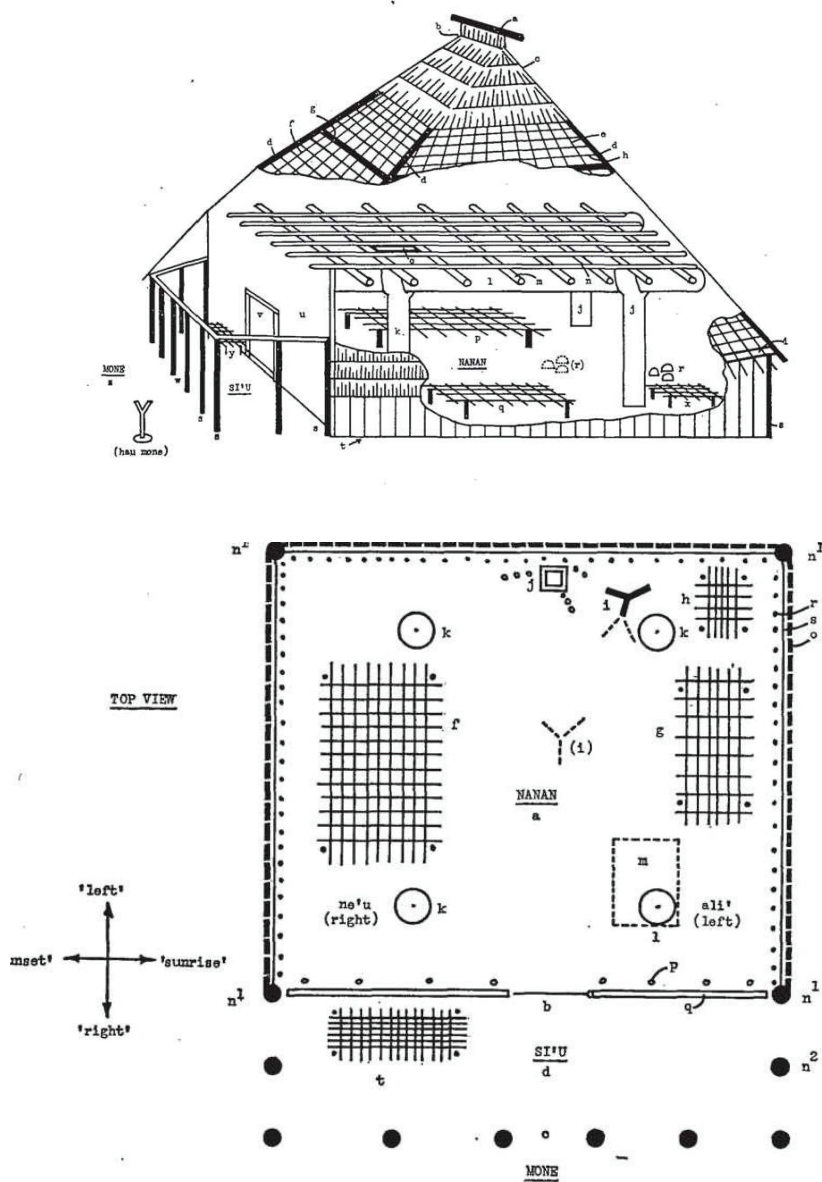


Figure 3:
Cosmological order of
the Atoni was explained
cooperatively in the
sketches.

Bourdieu's famous analysis of the Berber house in Algeria is another illustration. Its emphasis lies in the symbolic presentation of conceptions about the relationship between men and women, and their built environment. In this relationship, the male is associated with the outside and characterized as cultural, bright and fertilizing, in contradistinction to female which, of itself, is dark and, being associated with the inner space, is in constant need of fertilization and illumination (Bourdieu 1973). In this description, Bourdieu argues that the buildings not only serve a functional purpose but also express

a "set of symbolic opposition and hierarchies that order the societal divisions" (p. 106). Bourdieu's 1990 analysis of the Kabyle house stresses that the allocation of spaces corresponds to basic dichotomies in the Berber cosmogony. Interestingly, the communicative role was recognized by an outsider, but was not obvious and realized by the Berber builders. While Bourdieu's analysis of the Kabyle house is obviously not translatable to every building in a society, it still shows how buildings serve a symbolic function. According to these examples, an analysis means much more than merely a

demonstration of the socio-cultural background of architectural symbolism. Nuances are added to the understanding of ideas and values in a society which can be compared with a text in its own right and which can provide new insights in architecture.

Until the end of 1970s, the concept of *house* has attained additional significance in architectural anthropology. In actual fact, houses have many aspects; they are complex, multifaceted entities, particular aspects of which are given meaning by different people within particular cultures, contexts and historical conditions. These meanings constantly shift within cultures, and they have no inherent cross-cultural validity. None of them can be understood as static pre-given structures, whether these are of the material kind or mental projections of a structuralizing sort, as Yi Fu Tuan describes:

People from different cultures differ in how they divide up their world, assign values to its parts, and measure them. Ways of dividing up space vary enormously in intricacy and sophistication, as do techniques of judging size and distance. Nonetheless certain cross-cultural similarities exist, and rest ultimately on the fact that man is the measure of all things. This is to say, if we look for fundamental principles of spatial organization we find them in two kinds of facts: the posture and structure of the human body, and the relations (whether close or distant) between human beings. Man, out of his intimate experience with his body and with other people, organizes space so that it conforms with and caters to his biological needs and social relations (Tuan, 1977, p. 32).

Houses have been related to human beings as a universal theory. One initial idea is that they have been frequently thought of as an extension of the human body. The idea of “house and the body” was introduced in order to draw the picture of the intimate connection between domestic space, the human body and the mind in continuous interaction in terms of the physical structure, social conventions and mental images of such spaces. This idea stresses that once people construct houses and make them in their own image, they use these houses and house-images to construct themselves, taking them as representations of individuals and groups. Littlejohn (1960) in his study of the Temne house, and in Bourdieu’s 1977 classic paper on the Kabyle house suggest the innovative exploration of the link

between human body and domestic space, and between domestic space and the experience and activities of inhabitants. In his analysis, Bourdieu defines the house as “the principal locus for the objectification of generative schemes”, in which is inscribed a vision and structure of society and the world. According to him, moving in ordered space, the body “experiences” the house, which serves as a mnemonic form for the embodied person. Through habit and inhabiting, each person builds up a practical mastery of the fundamental scheme of their culture (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 89 cited in Carsten and Hugh- Jones, 1995, p. 2).

According to Levi-Strauss (1963), the potential theoretical significance of the house was drawn with the scope of “house societies”. Roxanna Waterson (1995) notes that the key features of the definition of the term “house societies” are (i) the ideal of continuity; (ii) the passing down of some form of valued property (a name, land, titles, sacredness and supernatural powers); and (iii) the strategic exploration of the “language of kinship or affinity”, which includes extensive use of fictive relations when necessary to prevent the extinction of a “house”. These then may be judged the irreducible aspects of the “house” as a social phenomenon. This idea expands an alternative language of the house by focusing on the connections between architectural, social and symbolic significance (Waterson, 1995). With this idea, houses are the depiction of a specific and widespread social type, which emphasizes the significance of the indigenous category of house in the study of systems of social organization. They are a place for understanding the development of society, and significantly reveal an establishment of a system of thought, or a specific form of social organization, representing a crucial practical and conceptual unit in the economies, kinship systems and political organization of widely different societies. These striking works mark a major step in understanding the links between material culture, kinship system, sociality and the human body, and also reveal different ways in which houses are considered as social interactions with the surrounding world (Carsten and Hugh- Jones 1995). The diversity of vernacular architecture studies can be found recently in various sources of literature. Architects initiated many of them with an interest in anthropology, with the common goal not only of describing and classifying forms but also of understanding them within their local context. One notable example is a series of work edited by Paul Oliver in *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*. This series investigates and documents

the great variety of house forms in different cultures around the world. They explain the relation between architectural aesthetics and the very special structural conditions of related ways of life and social orders (Oliver, 1998).

3. MYTH, LEGEND AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF ARCHITECTURE

In historical and anthropological studies, traditional narratives such as a storytelling, myth and legend are considered key evidence to trace the origins of society. They are anecdotes involving supernatural beings and powers, ancient tales of primordial culture, carrying a necessary cultural message that embodies and reveals an explanation for the chronological development of early society, socio-cultural phenomena, religious belief, and ritual practices. As Peter Blundell Jones says:

Although human known history is relatively short, and human culture has developed quite recently, it is surprising that what our ancestors were doing for all those years and the long evolutionary path is still not clear, ... it is a burning issue, which has been ignored and leaves a perplexing silence (1990, pp. 93-5).

Myth and traditional narrative are often ignored by modernized people, since they are considered to be irrational and intimately related to unexplainable and supernatural circumstances. In the study of architecture and the built environment, myth, legend, and storytelling always stand for a nonsensical belief and suspicious story, and many scholars who rely on a rational and practical perspective refuse them. However, myths can reveal enriching information and carry cultural messages underlying in architecture and its related built environment. In fact, myth, legend and storytelling can hardly be separated from architecture. Myth can describe "how man and the world had their origin, and give solidity and significance to the presence of a group in some particular area by providing them with historical and existential justification for their own presence there, for their relationship with their neighbours and with natural resources, for the relationship between their clans, and so forth". (Guidoni, 1975, p. 13). With the attempt to introduce new insights into an analysis of architectural study, in *Primitive Architecture: History of World Architecture*, Enrico Guidoni

stresses that the study of architecture and built environment "...must reckon with cultural currents, social and economic structures, and ritual and mythic complexes" (1975, p. 7).

In case of the Dogon house, Marcel Griaule (1965) explains that myth, legend and storytelling play significant roles in structuring the world system and architecture of the Dogon. In their world, the built environment was built in relation to the myth of eight ancestors, and reflected in the organization of the village, and in the construction of the large family house, the granary and the sanctuary. These buildings link the various groups of Dogon with their mythic ancestors in the socio-cultural domain, providing them not only with shelter but also with temples of living and dead souls. Griaule provides a detailed description of the Dogon house.

The front elevation [of the house] was twelve cubits wide and eight cubits high; it was pierced by ten vertical rows of eight square niches, their sides measuring a handbreadth; these niches extended from ground level to a horizontal line of swallow's holes which lay under the shelter of a roof of small wooden billets no larger than a cubit in size. The whole facade was finished off by a series of slender columns like sugar loaves, each one topped by a flat stone intended to catch the rain; but the water had worn them away so that they had come to look like hour-glasses (p. 91). The paired holes on the two surfaces of the front wall are particularly occupied by the temporary death of one of their eight ancestors, Lebe, who was subsequently reincarnated in the form of a serpent, and the front façade, with its eight rows of ten niches, represents the eight ancestors and their descendants, numerous as the fingers on their hands (p. 92). The niches are the homes of ancestors, who occupy them in order to birth of beginning with the highest row. The niches should never be closed, for the ancestors need to breathe the outdoor air. On the carved door of the upper storey there are, or should be, eight rows of eighty figures, picturing the men and women of the whole world descended from the original ancestors (p. 93).

In the same vein, Amos Rapoport (1975) signifies that myth and legends are not only used to interpret the origins of architecture, but can also reveal a picture

of how primitive people organize their world, its built environment, and its geographical designation. He illustrates how the Australian Aborigines systematize their surrounding world.

They organize their landscape and construct their small temporary hut by the relations with their mythical ancestor-snake and the imitation movement of a real snake crossing a sandy terrain in the dream-time ritual.... The myth of the routes taken by the ancestral heroes across the territory has been elaborately developed and is widespread through the vast aboriginal area. The ritual plan is constituted by circles and straight lines, locating the site for temporary huts and ceremonial routes. ..., the mythological heroes appear and disappear from a 'hole' on the surface of the earth and go through a serpentine path, and thus the landscape was created on a featureless world, including mountains, watercourses, livings, and so on. While the Australian Aborigines wander through the landscape and follow the path of the dreamtime events, the mythology born in their minds also becomes the map of

their territory, explaining the creation of landscape by the mythological heroic creatures of the dreamtime that sustain the power of their clan structures. Under such conditions, the myth serves to order the world, making out place and indicating the difference between places, some of which are more significant than others and the physical structure and natural features of the landscape are thus imbued with mythical colours and human embodiment (p. 49).

Myth, legend and storytelling should be interpreted as a deliberate philosophical attempt to explain and understand the world; they are a means to describe the ways early people organized their order and culturally dispensed it to the built environment. Myth and legend cannot be dismissed as "mere error and folly". Rather, they should be viewed as "an interesting product of the human mind" or they can be represented as a "primitive ways of reasoning" (Ackerman, 1975). Myth and legend can invoke an evolutionary view of human social development from savageness to civilization, in the course of which some primitive explanations survive in certain modern belief and custom (Taylor, 1958).

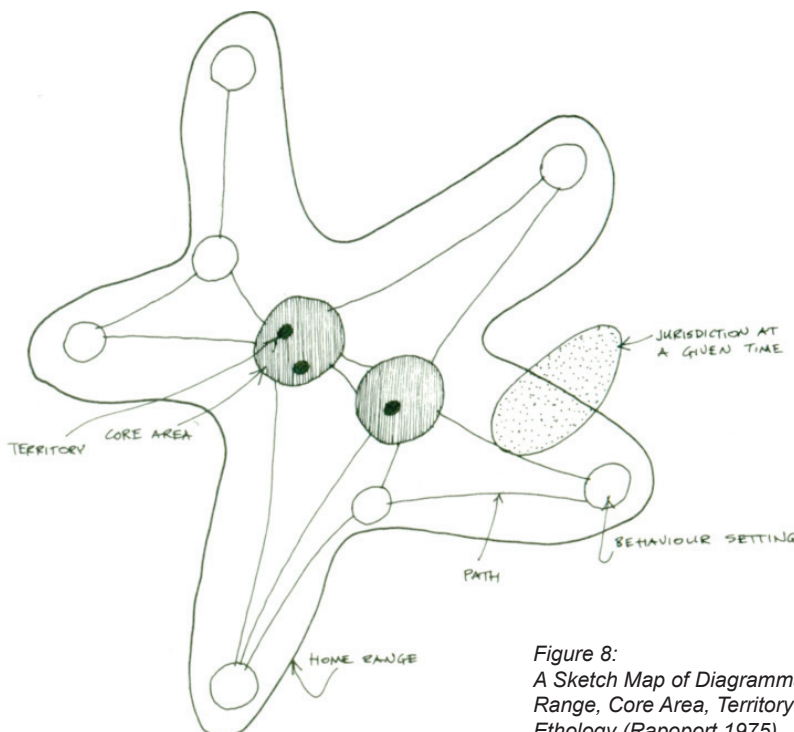


Figure 8:
A Sketch Map of Diagrammatic Representation of Home Range, Core Area, Territory and Jurisdictions derived from Ethology (Rapoport 1975).

4. MYTH, RITUAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE BUILT FORM

Myth and legend are relatively related to ritual practice, myth determines the ritual that it accompanies, as Leach says “myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, and they might be the same” (1954, p. 13). Myth can be regarded as an explanation of what ritual was about even if the original meaning has been forgotten or confounded. It is considered as a representation of a social creation that exists in every society (Smith 1969), while ritual is the original source of the expressive forms of cultural life, and fundamentally serves the basic social function of creating and maintaining community. Ritual acts imply a type of “gift” model by which human beings make offerings to ancestors and spirits in return for blessings. As primitive forms of reasoning, myth and ritual reveal much about human perception and cognition. Myth accompanying ritual can tell a sacred story about the actions of spirits and gods; they are a means of a festive “communion” between humans and spirits or gods that has the effect of sacralising the social unity and solidarity of the group, and thereby explains how things came to be the way they are.

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial times, the fabled times of the beginning. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of supernatural beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the cosmos, or the only fragment of reality- an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behaviour, an institution. Myth, then is always an account of a creation, it related how something was produced, began to be..., because myth relates the existence of supernatural beings and the manifestation of their sacred powers, it becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities (Eliade 1963, pp. 5- 6).

In *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*, Catherine Bell (1997) concludes that myth, like ritual, simultaneously imposes and orders. They account for the origin and nature of that order, and shape people’s dispositions to experience that order in the world around them. Myth gives a coherent and meaningful unity to a diversity of religions, cultures, and histories. It can explain how human beings share the powerful socialization imposed by the sacred, or by the seasons, or by a divinity. Thus,

it might be concluded that ritual is dependent on myth, while in turn myth is never separated from the ritual involved in telling the sacred story. Intrinsic to the ritual enactment of the events in the story is the recitation of the myth itself, a system to assure people that what they are doing in the ritual is what was done in the primordial age when the gods, spirits, heroes, or ancestors ordered the cosmos, created the world, and established divine models for all subsequent activity. The interrelation between myth and ritual provides accounts of universal experience and logical system that appear to prove the unity within human diversity, and to delineate the broad outlines of what is meaningful in human experience in general.

By definition, ritual means a prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service, including a series of actions compulsively performed under certain circumstances, and it has to *take place* somewhere. If the performance of ritual acts is prevented, people will experience tension and anxiety. In general, ritual experience connects symbolic meanings with space, making metaphorical ideas visible. Space is closely related with every aspect of ritual, providing physical shelter for ritual performance. The experiences of people towards ritual are initially based on the experience of bodily movements in daily life that they learn to make on first encountering the world, entering into, moving forward and back, left and right, up and down, and coming out, with particular marks and meanings in the ritual performance. Pierre Bourdieu (1973) has raised the idea of “the body as geometer” to illustrate the experience of bodily movement by noting that with the “human body as geometer, people divide the world with their body through the movements and displacements which make the place within which they are enacted as much as they are made by it” (p. 108).

Any gesture performed is brought about and accompanied with a ritually elaborated and challenged enactment, and it is very important for the process of constructing space. The relation between ritual and architecture is a subject that needs to be explored, since they are intimately associated. In fact ritual can take place anywhere within particular time-space, either outside or inside buildings. Spaces that contain rituals embody a strong sense of symbolic meaning. Thus, ritual experiences connected with symbolic meaning turn spaces into a domain in which the people perform various kinds of ritual in order to obtain their personal desires (Doxtator, 1983). In this way, space is closely related to every aspect of ritual;

the relation between them is inseparable. Space provides a physical shelter for ritual performance; it plays the role in supporting the order of rituals. In traditional societies, most buildings, either religious edifices or human habitations, have to do with ritual acts, expressing symbolic meanings of belief, or religious ideologies of people and societies (Bourdieu 1973, Cunningham 1964, Eliade 1987).

Ritual and its features construct the space with symbolic meanings, ordering buildings in a set of metaphysical discriminations, such as natural and supernatural powers, cosmological idea, sacred and profane, hierarchical order, living and dead, as Peter Blundell Jones says “architecture meshes with a series of social rules and beliefs, each sustaining the other” (1985, pp. 34-9). Symbolic representations of the built form and ritual culture are significantly pervasive; much literature has been written in order to excavate the interpretation of architectural space and ritual meanings. In many pre-modern cultures, constructing a building is equivalent to founding a microcosm and reconstructing a symbolic order of both cosmic and social worlds. From this account, we can establish the point that built form is never free from symbolic meanings. Constructing an established space must be associated with rituals, with the aim of regenerating both cosmological and social orders. It builds up the relationship between activities and the socially structured environment. As a model of the microcosm, architecture reflects the experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of people in shaping and ordering their cognitive world.

Ritual functions as a system that frames human activities by establishing a setting as a reminder for their reiterative actions. It needs to be performed in space so that the performers can establish their identities with their ritual objects, between ritual objects and the world, and also between them and the world. Their experiences and perceptions of the ritual make possible the founding of sacred space, by which the sacred manifests itself in space, and the ordered world comes into existence. As Mircea Eliade says: “a house is not just an object or a machine to live in, but it must be animated and receive life and soul, ..., every construction implies a new beginning of life with every inauguration at dawn with the first light shining on the world” (1957, pp. 55-7). Therefore, the sacred character of space is located not only as the ritual space, but is also involved in countless rites of building, which have been recorded in religion and folklore, intending to frame the world within its limits and establish its order.

5. CONCLUSION

Architecture can play a communicative role by expressing meaning through the built environment. As a result it has a very important responsibility as society searches for sustainable solutions for mitigation and adaptation in the face of environment change. A variety of cultural or symbolic values can be expressed through physical appearance, spatial arrangement, pattern of use, and landscaping for a building, and therefore connect to new ways for modern society again creating an ecological architecture. Architectural anthropology allows us how to recognize a multiplicity of factors that combine to influence architecture and its related built environment, and is necessary for any sustainable, ecological based architecture in the future. In any given society one of these factors may be of foremost importance. The main point, however, is the interaction, under the primacy, direct or indirect, of the prevailing socio-cultural patterns and values. And it is at this stage of investigation that the question of the cultural-historical situation gains new importance. Every culture builds upon its predecessors; every factor influencing architecture and built environment departs from the array of structures and associated meanings which are at the disposal of the society, having been passed down from its ancestors to the descendants. For this reason, it might be concluded that the study of architecture and its related built environment should not be considered as a narrow concept of physical values. It should be reconceived in its temporal depths and extended towards an anthropological approach that can help us to clarify the factual complexity of architecture. With the help of *Architectural Anthropology*, we can understand how our ancestors created their sustaining world and how we can create ours.

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