

Culture, way of life, and power – concepts for research in architecture

av

Anja Kervanto Nevanlinna



Anja Kervanto Nevanlinna,
TKK, Helsinki.

Within various fields of knowledge, concepts like culture and way of life have opened new approaches and new areas of interest. In research in architecture, this process is only beginning. In this article, the cultural approach is discussed as a means to understand the architectural totality. A genealogy of the concepts is presented as background. The main part of the article contains the author's interpretation of how the meanings of the concepts of culture have evolved within research in architecture.

ONE OF THE ISSUES OF RESEARCH in architecture has been the difficulty to define its object and to develop methods of study. As a phenomenon, the built environment – architecture, urban forms – is about totalities, wholes. Research in architecture seems to require its own methodologies for studying entities, with relevance to the particular nature of the subject. The history of research in architecture is full of examples of studies in which both the approaches and the methodology have been directly borrowed from more established disciplines. As a result, architecture has not been perceived as a separate field of study, but rather as marginal in relation to the central issues of society.

The most common approach to architecture has been technological. Technically oriented, empirical studies of architecture have been criticized for reducing architecture into physical elements and their performance. The objects of study are seen as measurable and easily definable.

Knowledge about the whole is constructed as a sum of the parts. For certain problems, a study of parts may well be better suited than a study of the totality; but this implies knowledge about the totality of which it is a part, the frame of reference which is not questioned.

Many architects feel that the study of architecture as a technical or empirical phenomenon eliminates the essential character of architecture. Division into smaller parts is seen as fragmentary and meaningless. For them, architecture is something which is whole, just like a piece of art, to be experienced but not analyzed. Although the argumentation is not quite correct in that art is also analyzed, objects of art are primarily observed as entities and not as composed of technical parts.

As an alternative to the technological views, psychological approaches to architecture have emphasized experience either by the creator/designer or the viewer/user. While earlier theories

contained holistic concepts like archetypes, a large majority of contemporary psychological approaches apply test and survey methods which again divide experience into parts.

The problem of the whole in architectural research could be approached from the direction of culture. Cultural anthropology is specifically developed as a discipline interested in the study of cultural entities. In architectural research, the cultural approach requires a redefinition of what architecture is about. For the cultural approach, the conceptions of architecture as physical elements or as emotional experiences have to be replaced by a conception where architecture is seen in relation to the society that produced it. In this, the cultural approach can be used as the bridge connecting architectural studies to social studies.

A genealogy of the concepts

Our contemporary conceptions of culture and way of life are partly derived from theories of long ago. Their evolution has not been a linear or unbroken progress towards a comprehensive theory of culture, but rather a group of originally unconnected developments which only today we can see to have contributed to the same process. These fragments indicate how slowly new ways of seeing are filtered into dominant conventions of understanding.

The first definition of culture has been attributed to Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) who understood culture as a generalization of the ways of a society: a common projection reflected in the thinking, art, social institutions, language, ways of life and activities. From Vico's cultural history, the interaction, sometimes even struggle, between the objective scientific approaches and the subjective holistic approaches has continued. Vico's view of culture rejected the possibility to generate universal truths about social phenomena and established the idea of more than one culture; the secrets of exotic cultures could be exposed.¹

William Dilthey (1833–1911) distinguished the cultural sciences and emphasized their historical character.² The methodological expansion

was the foundation of a large number of comparative social sciences including anthropology, sociology, law, linguistics, ethnology, religion, literature as well as histories of art, ideas, institutions, and civilizations.³

Art historians Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) and Ernst Gombrich (1909–) saw each cultural period to have its particular spirit which determined the character of the cultural phenomena of that period.⁴ At each phase, history could take only one form. The art historical concept of *Zeitgeist* as an overall influence deviated from the earlier idea of the simultaneous presence of more than one culture.

Max Weber (1864–1920) continued the idea of sciences of culture: he sought to explain the products of human culture through an understanding of the values inherent in the culture. His view maintained that to understand a phenomenon is to understand its value to us: the meanings we attach to it.⁵ Meanings depend on our values, our world view, our culture: on our context.

Wittgenstein (1889–1951) used the concept *world view* (*Weltbild*) to define the context, the frame of reference, and to indicate that our cultural basis is not individually chosen but a consequence of our belonging to a community.⁶ Human activities are directed by the cultural context in which we function; at the same time, our activities generate a basic understanding, a world view. In this sense, culture and the world views attached to it are different aspects of the same reality.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) saw modes of production as the basis of the way of life of a person: people are what their conditions of existence determine.⁷ Later, several researchers have developed theories in which people's ways of life include not only the patterns of behavior, defined by the conditions of existence, but also their meaning to the person: how people understand and structure their own everyday life.⁸

The *Annales* school, established in France in 1929 by Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) and Marc

Bloch (1886–1944), addressed the material realities conditioning human beings through economic processes, social structures, and environmental influences—in a sense, culture.⁹ Following the *Annales* line of thinking, Henri Lefebvre (1905–1991) perceived the everyday life of a people to be linked with global developments through acquisition of raw material, markets, costs of labor as well as international and domestic policies: the context was global. He saw the control of space as the fundamental source of social power in everyday life.¹⁰

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–) focused on everyday practices. His concept of habitus referred to an internalization of social structures: a system of tendencies of the individual to prefer certain practices. Habitus was a relation between the practices and the situation, developed within a subculture and determined how the individual attached value to a way of life and made choices between practices.¹¹ He saw society as various forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social, which could be used to generate symbolic power. The dominant culture established patterns of meaning incorporated in practices.¹²

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) used the idea of cultural practices as the foundation for understanding societies. His works on insanity, the clinic and the prison centered on the analysis of historically situated systems of institutions and practices. He saw built forms as part of the modern political technology not only for the control of individuals but also for their eventual transformation.¹³ Foucault analyzed particularly those cultural practices which are organized by knowledge and power and in which our understanding of the concepts of society, culture as world view, and the individual are themselves produced. According to him, cultural practices and discourses can only be perceived as part of a society's history; he used history as a method for understanding our own time.¹⁴

Today, culture is conventionally defined as the cultivation of the mind and as the products of this process. A wider content includes the anthropological definition of a group of people who

live in the same environment, and are linked by common habits, assumptions, and a way of life. A third way to define culture is to see it as a system of meanings and symbols, a common consciousness and language.¹⁵

In research in architecture, the concept of culture has been extensively applied, but only in its narrowest meaning, as the conventional cultivation of the arts. Only slowly have the interpretations of culture been enlarged to include concepts like way of life and power.

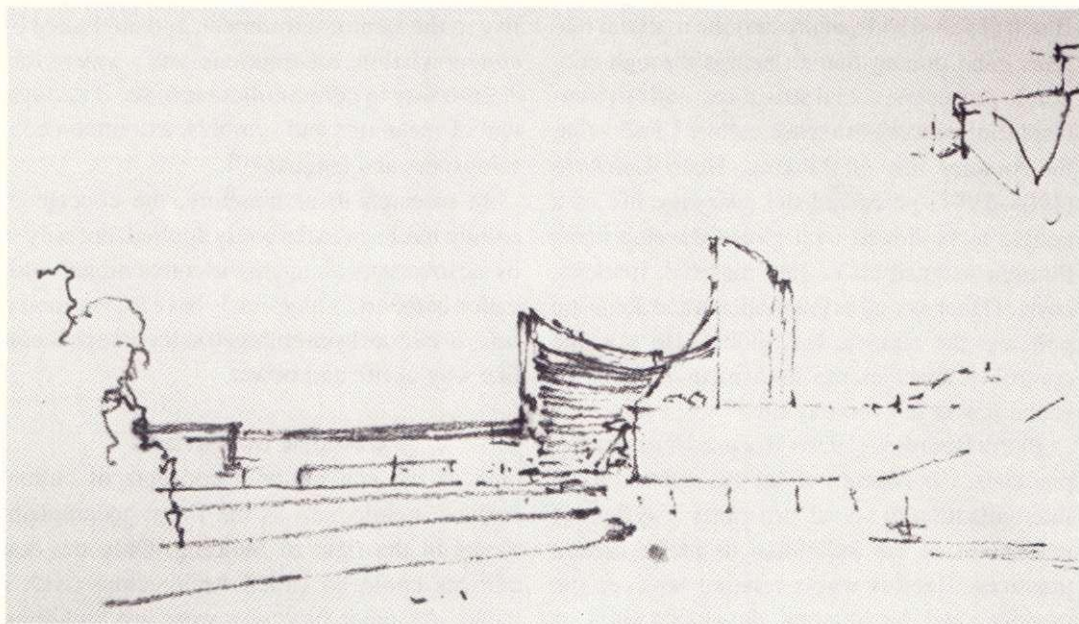
Culture as heroes

One of the conventional concepts of culture defined architecture as the finest accomplishments in the field of building. Only the best edifices could be called Architecture (with a capital A), other structures were just buildings. This concept can still be observed among architects. The approach emphasized the cultivated, the unusual, the monuments, distinct public buildings, and their designers as heroes, i.e. high culture.

Culture as vernacular

In opposition to this, another concept of culture was generated for architectural studies, in which the goal was to understand the indigenous, the common, the urban environment as a whole, dwellings, and the production of built forms without designers. Vernacular and primitive buildings and settlements were chosen as the objects of study, not only to display the variety of built forms in different cultures, but also to provide insight on the basic nature of dwelling which was assumed to appear more clearly in primitive huts. Amos Rapoport's *House Form and Culture* (1969) was for long the leading book on the topic.

Vernacular buildings could not be studied in the same way as monuments which were often analyzed in terms of styles (art history) and had been documented well from the beginning. Very little historical material existed on vernacular architecture, and the methodology developed toward empiricism: a direct description of the

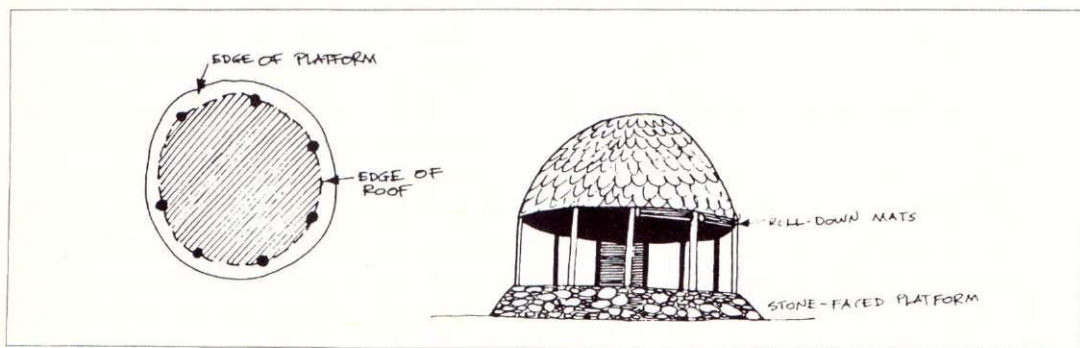


"Culture as heroes": Aalto's sketch for Helsinki University of Technology main auditorium, 1960. (Source: Alvar Aalto, *Luonnoksia*. Ed. G. Schildt, 1972.)

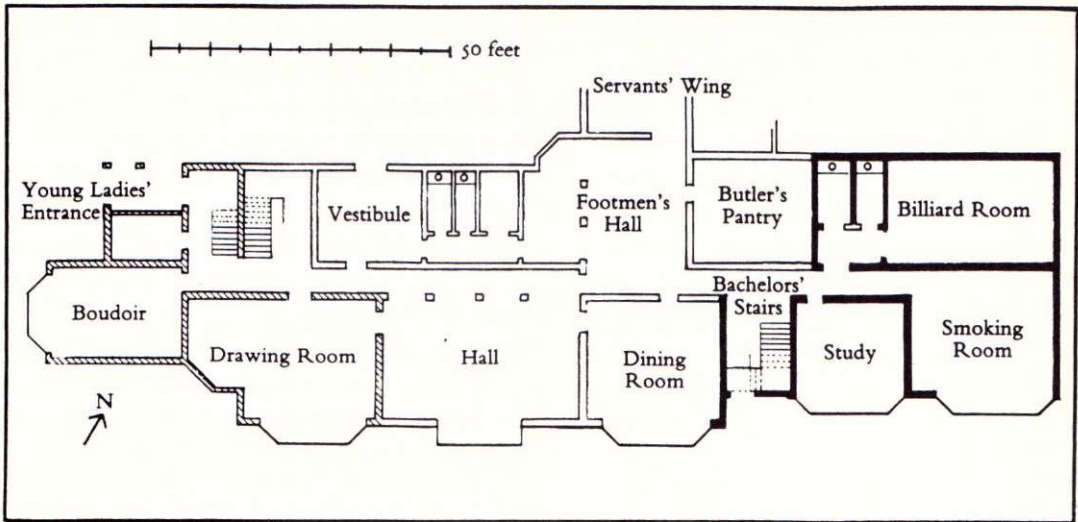
built form as it appeared in the present to the observer. Lack of written data also meant that the focus was on the physical form, with little possibilities of analysis of its sources, although some attempts were made also in this direction. Usually form was seen as a response to climate, to available building materials and technology, and to the symbols of each culture – all elements which changed relatively slowly in primitive societies.

Two lines of studies appeared. The correlation between the technological resources and the built form appealed to some researchers. Their approach was empirical, based on collecting data of mostly buildings, described physically in

detail. The results were catalogues of drawings and photographs of houses, mostly from rural areas. Other researchers studied the symbolism attached to dwellings. In their approach, buildings were transmitters of an invisible world of myths and meanings. Their methods included observation and references to anthropological studies. Interest was focused on the interior of the building, sometimes with little information about the built form encompassing it; this approach had been borrowed from anthropology. The results were usually plans of dwellings, indicating the location of artifacts and functional areas within the room.



"Culture as vernacular": Samoan dwelling. (Source: A. Rapoport: *House Form and Culture*, 1969.)



"Culture as way of life": Plan of Abbeystead Hall (J. Douglas 1886) showing male and female zones. (Source: M. Girouard: *Life in the English Country House*, 1978.)

Both the technologically and the symbolically oriented lines of thinking represented the phase of introducing the concept of culture into architectural studies. In both, the vernacular was idealized into a myth of a culture free of conflicts and of an environment uncontaminated by the evils of modern life. It was a nostalgia much like that of the 19th Century critics of the industrial town, based on falsely idyllic assumptions of the conditions of the vernacular peoples.¹⁶ In both of the described approaches, culture denoted *the Other*: something exotic and different from oneself, from the dominant concepts of architecture. Still, culture was approached with the same methodology used for studying *the Self*, western architecture. In this initial phase, the potential of a new approach with its own objects of study, own methods, and own types of conclusions was not perceived nor used.

Culture as way of life

Another concept of culture was being developed within the social studies, especially within sociology and psychology. For them, culture was a concept applicable not only in studies of other societies, but of our own society as well. Whereas the earlier lines of thinking had emphasized either the physical character of the built forms

(environment as object) or the subjective experience of the people living in the buildings (people as subject), the new approach emphasized the reciprocal character of the environment-behavior relationships. The practical applications of the theories focused on how various sub-cultures used environments, and in particular, how their use differed from the conventional practices of design.

Again, several lines of thinking emerged. One developed from social histories and processes, relating architectural phenomena to the people using built forms. Urban histories – from Lewis Mumford's classic *The Culture of Cities* (1938) and *The City in History* (1961) – provided the context for cultural studies of both cities and buildings. Another line of thinking was based on sociological and psychological studies where the environment was seen to influence groups of people and individuals who then modify their environments. This relationship was illustrated in the concept of way of life of the people, a concept closely related to that of quality of life. To some extent, environments were more than earlier seen from the point of view of the individual using them. Through the environment, society established the conditions in which individuals and groups of people had to operate.

Although it is fashionable these days to romanticize the slum, this has not been my purpose here. The West End was not a charming neighborhood of "noble peasants" living in an exotic fashion, resisting the mass-produced homogeneity of American culture and overflowing with a cohesive sense of community. It was a run-down area of people struggling with the problems of low income, poor education, and related difficulties. Even so, it was by and large a good place to live.¹⁷

Analyses of cultural processes attached to specific built forms provided the in-depth understanding at a more detailed level.¹⁸ Studies on particular building types illuminated changes in the quality of housing of different groups of people: these included the mass housing of the working classes and the lower middle class¹⁹ as well as the country houses of the upper classes.²⁰ In these, the emphasis was on traditions of living in particular kinds of houses: on the ways of life of a particular class in relation to their physical environments. The ways of life of the dwellers were used to explain the built forms.

Abandoned life-styles can be disinterred from (houses) in much the same way as from the layers of an archaeological dig. (...) Although to some extent architecture follows its own rules it is also conditioned by the society for which it caters. The architects and builders of country houses were not producing pieces of abstract sculpture, but buildings designed to fit a particular way of life. This was not just a practical matter. The most successful country houses were those which managed not only to accommodate, but also to suggest and glamorize the life-styles of the people for whom they were built.²¹

Sociological studies were much used as background material, but in many cases architects had difficulties in converting their conclusions into design. Sometimes architects worked with sociologists to define relevant objects of study and develop new methodology. New studies

were often based on psychological and sociological approaches and methods, and included observations of physical traces and of environmental behavior as well as interviews of people using the environment. Among the more sophisticated methods were analyses of behavioral settings and circuits of different subcultural groups (age, ethnicity etc.), resulting in conclusions on how the environment served each subculture.

A study of an Italian working-class area in Boston demonstrated a method to develop guidelines for design:

For moral as well as for practical reasons, it is vitally important to respect the different customs of groups within our own society, and within urbanizing societies throughout the world. The social parameters of housing are as important as the legal, economic, and physical. The architect and planner need detailed information about the living patterns of people who are of different cultures or subcultures. This information about the functional requirements of urban subcultures (...) can be provided by analyzing the latent social structure and living patterns as they relate to the architectural environment.²²

Observations of behavior and the environment were analyzed in their cultural context, which determined their social significance: their meaning to the people. The architects' responsibility was to translate this information into design solutions.

In both the socio-historically and sociologically oriented lines of thinking, the research interaction was fruitful to architectural studies. Problems were now formulated differently from earlier studies, which led to a need to define and find new kinds of data, develop new methodology, and distinguish new concepts, all affecting fundamentally the thinking process. The need for multidisciplinary approaches increased, and problems began to be formulated more on the basis of the object of study and less on the basis of traditions within a particular discipline.

For architectural research, the major change from the earlier phases occurred at the level of values. Earlier, researchers, designers, and planners of built form had used *middle-class values to help low-income population solve their problems and improve their living conditions*²³; they had, in fact, used their own values assuming them to be universally valid. The new line of thinking discarded the moralistic attitudes and tried to understand the cultural totality from within, from the point of view of the people who were part of the culture.

This meant that the results of the research were different from those of earlier studies, not only because they generated new knowledge about various minorities and subcultures, but also because the values they conveyed differed from those of the earlier studies. In this sense, the cultural (hermeneutic, understanding) approach became a channel for counter cultural movements which opposed the pretence of objectivity held by the technocrats of society.

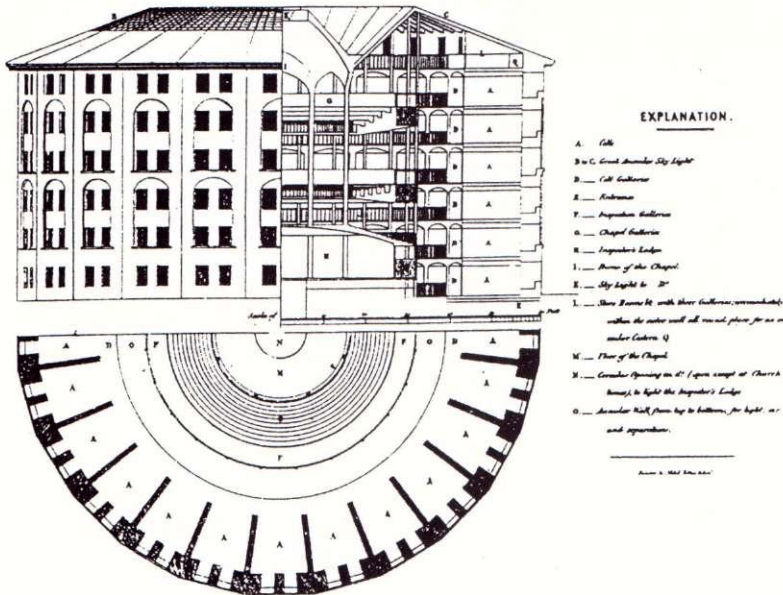
Culture as power

Through values, the concept of culture evolved into a philosophical one. In a sense, the idea of culture as way of life avoided the issue of choice. As long as the problem was formulated through analyses of individual dwellings, houses, or residential areas, within each unit the way of life was assumed to be relatively homogeneous and undisputable. Difficulties arose when ways of life were analyzed in urban or even global contexts. In cities, different ways of life and different values were simultaneously present, and design/planning choices supporting one way of life were often choices against another.

The role of cities and of urban design/planning in this process was examined in many fields of study, but in all the approach had a multidisciplinary character. Knowledge of sociology, history, economy and urban design/planning was necessary for understanding the phenomenon in its complexity. Again, the defining of problems in a new way required new kinds of data and of methodology.

In earlier studies, ways of life were used to explain built form; now, built form was seen also as a means to regulate people. Foucault's studies illustrated how architecture and space became instruments of control. He saw built forms as political technologies of power. One of the buildings he analyzed was Bentham's Panoptikon (1791), a plan for a building with a tower in the center of a courtyard and structures divided into cells at the periphery. Each cell had a large opening toward the central tower to which the inmate was

*A General Idea of a PENITENTIARY PANOPTICON in an improved, but as yet unfinished State.
See Postscript References to Plans, Elevations, & Sections (being Plans referred to as. N^o. 2).*



"Culture as power": Bentham's plan of the Panoptikon, 1791. (Source: M. Foucault: *Discipline and Punish*, 1979, from *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, 1843.)

continuously visible. It was an effective machine to observe the inmates, be they criminals, madmen, workers, or schoolchildren.

The building was not only for the control of individuals, it became a laboratory for their transformation. Similar methods of spatial regulation were in use in European cities for example under quarantine.²⁴ According to Foucault, the Panoptikon

is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form. (...) It is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centers and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons. Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used.²⁵

Foucault's philosophical inputs terminated any illusions of architecture as an autonomous art form. His contribution to research included a renewed interest in documents which earlier were considered marginal: all fragments of a discourse, not only the inputs of the leading members of the dominant group.

The concept of culture in architectural research thus contained the totality of the field of architecture and its inner relations. Within architecture and urban design, this approach has generated results which will cause a major restructuring of the field. The objects of study have varied from French practices of reason within the environment to American city planning and housing.

An ethnographic approach to society as the product of historical practices combining truth

and power consists of identifying society as a cultural object, specifying those authorized to make truth claims about it and those practices and symbols which localized, regulated, and represented that new reality spatially (form is equally a cultural object). The problem that social thinkers, reformers, architects, engineers, and emperors posed for themselves was one of bringing both norms and forms into a common frame that would produce a healthy, efficient, and productive social order.²⁶

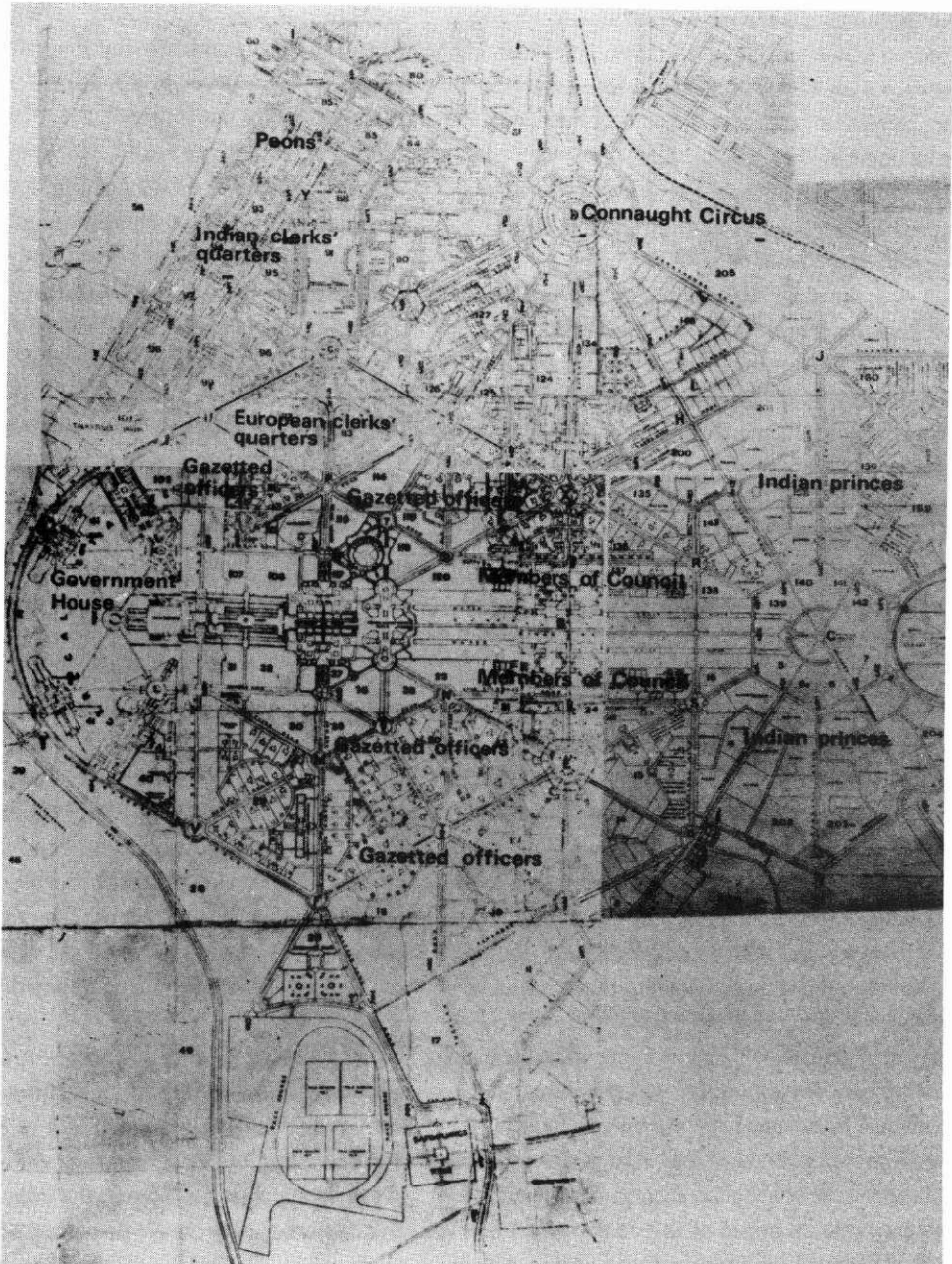
Rabinow's study on norms and forms of the social environment focused

not on "high culture" nor the practices of everyday life, but on the middle ground where social technicians were articulating a normative (...) modernism.²⁷

One area of study which originated in analyzing the relation of the colonial power system to colonial and post-colonial cities has extended into research of cities in general, in a global perspective. According to King, in a colonial city,

the segregation of areas performed numerous functions, the first of which was to minimize contact between colonial and colonized populations. For the colonial community they acted as instruments of control, both of those outside as well as those within their boundaries. They helped the group to maintain its own self-identity, essential in the performance of its role within the colonial social and political system. (...) The extensive spatial provision within the colonial settlement area, as well as the spatial division between it and the indigenous settlement, are to be accounted for not simply in terms of cultural differences but in terms of the distribution of power. Only this can explain why labor and urban amenities were available in the spacious, cultivated areas in the colonial settlement, but not in the indigenous town.²⁸

In these studies, built forms were examined as a force in production. Space was not only about the organizing of production, the patterning of



"Culture as power": Plan of lay-out of imperial Delhi, 1927. (Source: A. King: *Colonial Urban Development*, 1976.)

social relationships, and their expression. Space was also about the ideologies and world views attached to it, which regulated and fashioned the ways of life of a people. The urban processes were mechanisms of control, both locally and

globally. Colonial cities had been organized both to produce racial segregation and to reproduce a culture of segregation. Similarly, industrial cities continue to produce and reproduce particular cultures.

The concept of culture as the production of knowledge

For architectural research, the cultural approach holds significant potential. Its holistic character corresponds with the holistic interpretation of the relations between human beings and the environment. For me, architecture is about society; in that context, the cultural approach seems more fruitful than the technological or emotional approaches.²⁹

I see the four variations in the use of the concept of culture as a kind of genesis: a process which is continuing. The view of culture as heroes may have had relevance earlier this century, when the issue for (aesthetic) quality was used to promote the profession. Today, the initial use of the concept, particularly as the only interpretation, seems historical and does not seem to open up any new directions for research. This concept of culture is becoming rarer in architectural research.

The view of culture as vernacular was important in the evolution of the concept. Through it, culture was redefined and introduced into architectural research. The new interpretation of culture linked research in architecture to other fields of study, particularly anthropology, and was used as a method to analyze and criticize the conventional practices in architecture.

However, the idealistic, moralistic, and even romantic conceptions attached to the concept of culture as vernacular have limited its usefulness only to "primitive" phenomena which are untouched by for example western industrial influences. In the analysis of contemporary urban environments, the vernacular approach seems to exclude issues which are central in the global context; one example of this is the effect of the global basis of economies. In this sense, culture as vernacular seems to me somewhat outdated today.

The two later developments of the concept – culture as way of life and culture as power – seem promising for research also in architecture. Both open up new problems for discussion and support the development of new methods of study.

However, each seems to be better suited to the study of certain kinds of problems and areas.

Culture as way of life seems to be particularly fruitful in studies addressing the problems of a family type, an age group, a profession, or a residents' group, and within built forms, problems related to dwellings and residential areas. Through the frame of way of life, the everyday practices of individuals and the meanings they attach to them can be analyzed and compared. Today, sociological studies based on this concept of culture have advanced to the level from which research in architecture could benefit considerably.

While the way of life interpretation of culture focuses on the values and practices of each subculture and accepts them as valid for that subculture, the power interpretation emphasizes the inevitability of the conflict between the values and practices. Thus, culture as power appears fruitful in addressing problems of different social classes or ethnic groups within one area and problems of cities in general, both in a particular situation and as a historical process. In a sense, the power approach concerns issues which are contextual to the way of life approach. Way of life is about harmony between values and practices within a subculture. Power is more about the society as a whole, its varying subcultures, about the conflict of values within society, and about policies and politics of social change.

An analysis of the different concepts of culture within architectural research is about producing knowledge in architecture. Each interpretation of culture reflects a particular world view, a particular value system. To me, the concept of culture as heroes reflects a world view of one truth, of absolute values. Its antithesis, culture as vernacular, provides an alternative truth, but retains the world view of one truth. In a sense, culture as way of life developed as a philosophical antithesis to the vernacular approach: not one truth, but each individual or group having its own truth, i.e. the total relativization of truth. Culture as power, then, is about the conflict of values, about the

acceptance of the plurality of truths and their fundamental contradictions.

Finally, knowledge about architecture is produced in different contexts which influence not only the production of knowledge but also its use. So far, some designers seem to perceive the research of built forms as a threat to the values of the profession and as the demolition of the basic

assumptions of design. Instead, the cultural approach could be used to make the alternative preconditions of design visible and understandable. The different concepts of culture are not only about research in architecture, but also about the production and reproduction of the culture of architecture. This includes both the production of built forms and the discourse about it.

Notes

1. Berlin (*Vico and Herder, Two Studies in the History of Ideas*, 1976) quoted in Manninen 1989, p. 31–33.
2. Williams 1981, p. 15.
3. Berlin, *ibid.*
4. Manninen *ibid.*, p. 48–52.
5. Winch 1963, p. 45–46.
6. von Wright 1975, p. 24–25.
7. Quoted in Eskola 1985, p. 168.
8. E. g. Roos and Roos 1985, p. 85.
9. Hutton 1981, p. 237.
10. Lefebvre 1984, p. 145–146.
11. Bourdieu 1984, p. 101.
12. Roos 1986, p. 43–44.
13. Foucault 1979.
14. Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, p. 9, 120.
15. For a discussion of the usage of the concept, see Williams 1981, p. 10–11; Hall 1976, p. 16–17; and Wallerstein 1990. See also A. L. Kroeter and C. Kluckhohn: *Culture. A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, New York, 1952, and R. Williams: *Culture and Society*, London, 1958.
16. Benevolo 1971, p. 140–143.
17. Gans 1982, p. 16.

18. Sjögren-de Beauchaine 1988.
19. E. g. Burnett 1978.
20. Girouard 1978.
21. Girouard *ibid.*, p. 12.
22. Brolin and Zeisel 1968, p. 68. The study was partly based on Gans' (*ibid.*) findings.
23. Gans *ibid.*, xiii.
24. Foucault *ibid.*
25. Foucault *ibid.*, p. 205.
26. Rabinow 1989, p. 11.
27. Rabinow *ibid.*, p. 13.
28. King 1976, p. 39–40.
29. See Kervanto Nevanlinna 1985, 1987 and 1990 for a comparison of the three approaches.

Denna artikel har granskats vetenskapligt av minst två av de lektörer som anges på sidan 148.

Anja Kervanto Nevanlinna, architect, Lic. Tech., Faculty of Architecture, Helsinki University of Technology. Research in philosophies of architecture and in the cultural approach to architecture.

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