

The Network of Perspectives: Between the Division of Labor and Occupational Subcultures

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Most anthropologists would claim no particular competence in the field of architecture, and I do not either, beyond the pleasure I have always drawn from looking at houses and interior design. What anthropologists are expected to know something about is culture; and those who have come across some anthropology may also have gained an impression that there is a lot in it about kinship, about all the ways in which people around the world deal with relatives.

My grandfather's houses

So on that note, let me begin with my grandfather, and I will also have something to say about my brother-in-law. My grandfather was a minister of the Swedish church, but also the son of a farmer in Skåne (Sweden's southernmost province), and perhaps somewhat unlike many priests, a very practically inclined person. He built, I think, at least two houses for himself,

Theme: Building Bridges

This article was originally a lecture held at the Conference on "Building Bridges between Cultures of Users, Practitioners and Researchers within the Field of Architecture and Environmental Design" at Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, November 13, 1995.

in different places where he served, and since his family grew and grew – he eventually had seven children – these houses also had to grow and grow. Moreover, by the time his children had started families of their own, he also helped them build their summer houses. I spent my early summers in one of these houses, and I have some of my recollections of my grandfather from then: an energetic, headstrong, wiry, bearded little man in a straw hat, with a hammer in his hand much of the time.

When I have seen my grandfather's houses decades later I have been

amused, because one could usually see in these rambling structures how one room has been added after another over time, with whatever materials have been available. I doubt very much that these houses were built according to any proper drawings. More likely my grandfather thought about what he needed and then went out and put it together from what he had, with a little help from children and friends. Indeed they have reminded me of the kind of houses I have later seen in squatter settlements in Africa, Asia and Latin America, houses which have also grown spontaneously and over time, without much involvement of the building professions.

Now there was one problem with my grandfather's houses, especially those he built for his children and their families. There must have been something else in the gene pool, for all his children were taller than him.

And since he had been building to suit himself, they kept bumping their heads into his architecture, at least until they had acquired the habit of bending and ducking in the right places. This became a family joke, but what you have here, obviously, is also a miniature of our present topic: the problematic interaction between designers and users in the field of architecture. My grandfather the designer knew the users of his buildings well enough, as they were his own sons and daughters, and yet he failed to take their characteristics sufficiently into account.

Socially organized meaning

From this concrete story about kinship, let me turn now to something which is, at least to begin with, more general and abstract: the concept of culture. As we all know, this is a concept that has been defined in a great many ways over the years. But I want to sketch a basic perspective toward culture, especially of the kind that we live with in the contemporary world, which I hope can be useful in thinking about relationships between specialists and lay people, in various contexts but including that of architecture and design.¹

My own preference is to view culture as socially organized meaning and meaningful form. Just about all that we get into our heads and use in interacting with one another in social life is thus part of our culture. Compare this, perhaps, to what you will read on page 1 of many conventional text books in anthropology, where the emphasis will be on culture as something “shared” and “handed down

from generation to generation”. If something is really “shared”, I would argue, it is something that “I know, and I know that you know, and I know that you know that I know”. Indeed there are meanings – knowledge, beliefs, opinions, values – which we share, and know that we share, in this way. Our language, for example, works more or less well on the assumption that those sounds or written signs we put together carry the same meaning for speaker or writer as for listener or reader.

Yet many of the ideas and communicative forms we continuously handle are not really shared in this way, and this is probably particularly true nowadays. To begin with, we do not get them all from preceding generations. There is a lot of continuous renewal going on. Each generation is inventing a part of its own culture, its members developing it and communicating it among themselves rather than getting it more or less ready-made from their elders. Some of this may be shortlived, other innovations may become part of what is passed on to the next generation and beyond.

Apart from this time aspect of cultural process, however, it is also true that there is much non-sharing of culture in social life, at least in the sense that the “I know, and I know that you know, and I know that you know that I know” formula does not apply. These days we hear a great deal about “cultural collisions” and “culture shock”. No doubt this is often due to the increasing interconnectedness of the world. There is the transnational mobility which puts us in everyday touch with people who may have

inherited quite different ideas and modes of expression from their parental generations. And when we encounter other people’s universes of meaning through the media, we may also at least to begin with be quite puzzled.

This is a kind of non-sharing, however, which we may almost anticipate. Culture, after all, is very often spoken of in the plural form, as cultures. Sharing is only expected to extend so far, and with groups of people living far away we expect to find some differences (although there is also that recurrent counterargument about people everywhere, after all, having a great deal in common). More unsettling, perhaps, are the times when people somehow fairly close to us turn out not to think as we do. For a while at least, we may know what we know ourselves (or at least believe we do), we operate on some mistaken belief about what the other fellow knows, and really may not have the faintest idea of what he thinks we know. And then, as the fog clears, we may begin to work with other kinds of formulae, such as “I believe A, but I know that you are sure of B, and you probably think I know B for a fact, too”. And any number of other alternatives. Culture, I think, is on the whole a very diverse, and continuously shifting, network of such formulae, distributed over our social relationships. This is a major reason why I prefer to think of culture in terms of a social organization of meaning, rather than just in terms of stable sharing.

But particularly systematically important in our daily lives, I think, is the fact that our kind of culture is

entirely built on a certain amount of non-sharing of culture. The division of labor which makes our kind of society work is in a large part a division of knowledge. We can have access to much knowledge, or at least to the results of its application, through other people, instead of having to acquire it and master it ourselves. Rather than knowing precisely everything in our culture, we may know who has the knowledge that we need. The formula here, that is to say, is rather “I do not know, and I know that I do not know, but I know that you know”.

This kind of social organization of culture, rather than complete sharing, is fundamental to much of human life by now. We could hardly live the way we do without it. Practical as it is, however, it may come at a price. Literally, in the sense that we probably have to pay for it, in the market place or through our tax-money. But also in the sense that it sometimes does not quite turn out the way we would have wanted it. When my grandfather's children accepted his building expertise and let him build their houses for them, they paid this price as they knocked their heads into his door posts.

There is often a kind of slippage, then, between the users' desires and what they actually get from the experts. Precisely how far we are going to push this division of knowledge is something that tends to be somewhat open to debate. Even in the twentieth century preferences may have to some degree moved back and forth. There was a time when expertise was clearly ascendant, when expert authority was

continuously growing and the knowledge of ordinary people, lay knowledge, was pushed back, so that people were no longer expected to know how to take care of their health, look after their children, or to run their family lives themselves. It seemed that new sets of experts were forever coming into being, to be trusted as lay people learned to distrust themselves. And then on the other hand, perhaps especially by the 1970s, a reaction set in, and expertise and expert power came under strong criticism. It was felt that people should be in charge of their own lives more, and that experts too often did not seem to know what they were doing, or at least that they tried to expand their areas of authority into fields where their special competences were not sufficient, or even relevant.

Inward-turning subcultures

Anyhow, I believe it is useful to recognize that there are two somewhat conflicting tendencies in the organization of culture when a society has an extensive division of knowledge. I will try to sketch these. Let me first quote a few lines from Everett Hughes (1961: 28), an American sociologist who was a pioneer in the study of work, and of occupational cultures:

Whenever some group of people have a bit of common life with a modicum of isolation from other people, a common corner in society, common problems and perhaps a couple of common enemies, there culture grows.

My suggestion here is that society has a great many corners like this, with groups in them developing and main-

taining their own cultures, and not so few of these groups are made up of occupations and the people specializing in them. To be a little more precise, we may want to describe them as subcultures, insofar as they are integrated parts of a larger culture.

Now inside these subcultures, the formula I have already used – “I know, and I know that you know, and I know that you know that I know” – may work rather well. The people involved with them have shared knowledge, shared interests, shared purposes, shared experiences. When they come together they “talk shop” – they exchange news, anecdotes and gossip based on the knowledge, beliefs and values which they assume that each one of them already possesses. The common problems which Hughes referred to probably figure importantly here, and so, I suspect, do the common enemies if such can be identified.

Much of this, however, is rather inward-turning, and this is one of the tendencies I want to pinpoint. One finds this in many studies of quite varied occupations. In the 1950s, when another American sociologist, Howard Becker (1963: 79 ff.), was studying jazz musicians (he had been one himself), he noted that to support themselves, they often had to spend evenings playing dance music of a kind which they really despised, for audiences that interested them little. But when the audiences had gone home and the lights were turned down, they could start their jam sessions, playing for themselves, experimenting, earning each other's respect, developing their own subculture in their own corner.

Or take as another example the American cultural historian Robert Darnton's (1975) memories of the brief period he spent as a journalist at the New York Times. The real solution to the everlasting question of whom journalists wrote for, he found, was that they wrote for one another. They would read each other's stories closely, comment on them critically with a sharp eye for craftsmanship, but also show their appreciation when an assignment had been handled well.

One may have these ordinary readers, then, or these ordinary people who dance to the polkas one plays to earn one's bread and butter, but it is undoubtedly a widespread tendency in occupations to interact closely over shared meanings with colleagues and peers, in the office, over lunch, in meetings, in conferences. This is where you meet real understanding of how things are, where you get excited by the same things and can share subtle jokes, where you establish criteria of success and failure, and where consequently you perhaps build much of your reputation and your own sense of worth. Perhaps architects do such things in their corner as well.

Perspectives toward perspectives

With all these groups creating culture in their own corners, however, in their own directions and according to their own internal logic, one may sense that there is a certain centrifugal force with respect to the overall coherence of the wider culture. Those who are not in those particular corners may feel themselves left out, puzzled at what is going on, even abandoned by

the people on whom they after all depend, in that division of knowledge.

The other and somewhat opposed tendency, then, in the organization of a complex culture must be to look outward, toward the people with whom, as a specialist, one shares less. Here I want to propose that "perspective" is a useful metaphor in our attempt to understand how cultures are organized.

Depending on where you are in a society, you see different things; and the same things may look differently depending on where you see them from. In other words, what you learn, what you experience, what interests you acquire, are all related to your place in the society's network of social relationships. The perspective, we may thus say, is the individual's share or version of the wider culture with which he or she is engaged. And conversely, that culture consists of perspectives – not just a sum of individual perspectives, but a network of perspectives, interacting with one another.

The production and reproduction of subcultures in those varied corners of society are part of that interaction, but there is also the necessary tendency to develop more or less elaborate and precise perspectives toward perspectives which are less like one's own. It is in having perspectives toward other perspectives that we are really building bridges.

Again, "building bridges" is one metaphor, perhaps especially close at hand for architects and designers; anthropologists have often thought of developing perspectives toward other perspectives as a matter of "translating", not just languages but cultures. We go to people different from our-

selves and try to understand what they are saying, and then we return to our desks to try to shift it into our own language, our own culture.

The anthropological way of handling this process, of course, has developed over a long period of studying societies and cultures in different parts of the world, often very unlike those from which the anthropologists themselves have come. Our habit has been one of spending reasonably long periods with the people we want to get to know, observing what they do in their everyday lives, and also talking to them about it all. So what may architects do, as they try to build bridges, as they develop their perspectives toward other people's perspectives?

This is where I turn to my other kinsman, my brother-in-law. As I prepared these remarks, I thought I had better talk to an architect about this question; and my brother-in-law, who is a partner in a small architect's firm in Stockholm, turned out, in a long Saturday morning's conversation, to be almost a parody of the perfect informant for an anthropologist. As both his sister and I are anthropologists, he obviously felt that he knew something by now about how we work. And thus when I arrived, he had informative diagrams all prepared, so I would not have to draw them myself, and had a clear picture of what I was after; his perspective toward my perspective, that is, was already in place.

To begin with, my brother-in-law pointed to the intense, and intensifying, division of labor in the contemporary construction business. These days, an architect obviously has to

work with a variety of more highly specialized consultants in different fields. Consequently, he said, the role of the architect in this complex division of knowledge is in large part that of the humanist, the generalist, who tries to bring all these different perspectives together. And not only the perspectives of all the specialist consultants, for certainly, the architect also must try to keep in mind the perspective of the eventual user.

Now in many situations when people in social life are building perspectives toward perspectives and try to use them in interaction, they are certainly in a different situation than an architect tends to be. In the latter case there is, to begin with, the division of labor being such as it is, a tremendous problem of scale. My grandfather, when he was building summer houses for his children, was dealing with only a handful of clients, and still had problems. These ought to be rather greater when you are trying to build houses for people you have never met, and thousands or perhaps tens of thousands of them – how do you know anything about these people's perspectives?

Then there is also the factor of time. In much human interaction this is built in quite differently: you have the opportunity to continuously negotiate over each others' perspectives, check again, get closer, and so forth. In architecture, once a building is in place, there is less opportunity to make much use of whatever you may still find out about those who turn out to be its inhabitants (which is not to say that there can be no such opportunity).

As it happens, my brother-in-law's firm has recently been much engaged in building schools, and in renovating older schools. To a degree, that makes things somewhat less difficult, because here you have known users, and you can find out what their perspectives are. Thus his firm has been building up considerable experience in talking to users; to teachers, to kitchen staff, to parents in the Hem och Skola (the Parent-Teacher's Association), and negotiating perspectives before they finally come up with the plan of what to do. And, says my brother-in-law, much of the firm's expertise by now concerns the negotiating process – knowing whom to deal with, whom to ask, whom to talk to, and about what. This may not be the kinds of things architects are inclined to dwell on when they get together in their own corner, but the firm can now take a certain pride in a kind of interaction expertise, having users who are reasonably satisfied with a complicated, and complicatedly negotiated, product.

Microculture and metaculture

When you build ordinary apartment housing for ordinary people, you hardly know anything about them in detail. Building and rebuilding schools, you evidently have a chance to deal a little more directly with the users' perspectives. At the other end of the scale, you may find the project of dealing with one particular user, inventing a house, let us say, precisely for one family, with its own habits and its ideas about the desirable kitchen, bathroom, and closet space. I suspect that not too many architects are doing much of this at present.

On the other hand, my brother-in-law turned out recently to have become involved in a somewhat related experience, as one of his clients was a major housing business which wanted to try and let the future tenants in an apartment house about to be built have a say as to what kind of place they would want to move into, in twelve or fifteen months' time. So the architect would go to meetings with this small group of people, who would talk about themselves and what they liked. Before this, in a good Swedish fashion, the future tenants had all taken a course, so that they would know something about architecture and construction at the stage when they would get more directly engaged in negotiating about their future homes. (No doubt placing this kind of demand on future users is already something that is likely to exclude some number of people from getting into such a process.)

Let me get back to the culture concept again. I have said before that groups of people, like occupational groups, tend to develop shared, collectivized perspectives which we may describe as subcultures of the wider culture. Now I want to introduce another variation of the culture concept which could be useful for some purposes: that of microculture. A microculture consists of the quite concrete knowledge shared by some fairly small, closely connected group of people.² Perhaps this could be a group of friends, or the people in a neighborhood, or just family members. On the whole, the smaller the group is, the more detailed knowledge can be included in the "I know that you know

that I know” formula, knowledge about the members’ biographies and personalities, about events they have experienced. Much of this obviously has to do with habits and memories, and often they are anchored in a shared physical environment.

Such microcultures grow cumulatively over time, and they can hardly be planned. Dealing directly with future tenants, as my brother-in-law did, the architect can to a degree become a participant in the microcultural process, taking their experiences as well as their expectations for the future into account, and draw a house that would perhaps look like no other house. But beyond the phase of his direct involvement, the microculture will surely go on in its own way.

We know that people can come to care deeply about their microcultures and the settings to which they are closely tied, and that there may be a strong sense of loss when these habitats are destroyed or radically altered. I have a somewhat dramatic example. One of my graduate students grew up in Berlin, in the now wellknown Kreuzberg district. When he was eight years old and playing in the street one day, something strange happened. A wall was hurriedly constructed in the middle of his street, where it would remain for the next 28 years. He and his and brothers became quite used to that wall. A few times they would see people trying to escape over it from the other side, but they also used it for their graffiti, and it was useful for ball games. It became a part of their lives, a part of the definition of what was home.

Then the brothers moved away from Berlin, and when they came back

to see their old neighborhood after 1989, there was of course no longer that wall in the middle of the street. On its other side, in East Berlin, houses had been torn down during the intervening years, and others built in their place. It was not really, then, a matter of coming back to the neighborhood they had known before 1961 either. So in a serious moment of one of their conversations, one brother said, with a sharp sense of the absurdity of the statement, “You know, I really miss that wall”, and the other brother looked at him and said, “Well, I miss the wall too”.

In the larger scheme of things in the world, this may sound terrible, but not in the terms of their microculture. It had become more difficult for them to remember, sentimentally, their childhood games when one of the basic ingredients was no longer materially there.

When they are trying to build bridges to users in existing houses and neighborhoods, habitats which may be coming up for change and interference, architects and planners will obviously be dealing with microcultures, with sites of entrenched uses, predictable encounters and cherished memories. There are webs of those “I know, I know that you know, I know that you know that I know” arrangements here, vulnerable to rupture and attempts at transplantation. It is for the experts to realize that these are things about which, initially at least, they themselves do not know much.

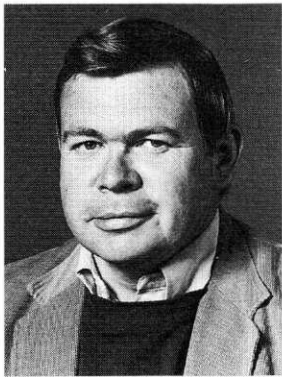
As I noted, in drawing an apartment building for some particular, identified tenants, my brother-in-law tried to take some existing microcul-

tural stuff into account, and was also in a way shaping some of the material conditions for a coming microculture. But the story may also have another twist. As I understand it, the skill that his firm has developed in building schools has given it a certain reputation, as one that is good at listening to, and negotiating with, school people. The firm, one might suggest, has a sort of microculture in itself, which includes knowledge of schools, and of the kind of people you meet in schools.

Now, however, it has become involved in this other kind of architecture, building apartment housing to the specifications of a future group of tenants. I think this may involve an interesting kind of leap. It seems the firm has not just earned the specific reputation for being good at building schools; it is also a reputation for being, in a more generalized way, good at dealing sensitively with various groups of users. And this, as I understand it, had an important part in the new project coming their way. I wonder if there is not also a kind of metaculture involved here – a kind of “culture of dealing with other cultures” which the firm has developed, to begin with in its dealings with school people, and which it can then adapt and shift around.

And perhaps the builder was engaged in a somewhat similar process of shifting between the very particular and the more general. Certainly, I said to my brother-in-law, you cannot have this complex microcultural process of engaging with particular future tenants everywhere; and he agreed that this was hardly practicable. Yet it was, he pointed out, a way for the builder to

learn from at least one small group of real people, at this point in time, how they thought about their homes, what they liked and what was important to them. By building a bridge to them, the building company might get some new ideas for itself, and sharpen its sense of how to build bridges to other users as well. For all involved, that is to say, this could be a learning experience. And that would be one of the very many ways in which the contemporary social organization of meaning keeps renewing itself.



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Notes

1. I have developed this conceptual point of view toward cultural analysis more fully in Hannerz (1992).
2. For a full application of the concept of microculture (in the context of an ethnically mixed group of young teenagers in a London neighborhood), see Wulff (1988).

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Figure 1. Mofjellet, Brønnøysund, as a landscape of sculpture.
Two sketches by the Swedish artist Erik Dietman: *Loke och Midgårdsormen*,
(Loke and the Midgård snake), 1992.