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Open Spaces of Traditional Societies

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Abstract: From the perspective of cultural pluralism in cultural anthropology, this study compares many types of open spaces around the world that have existed independently of a modernized Western context.

A survey was conducted of numerous ethnographies written about traditional cultures and societies, which referred to various types of outdoor spaces observed in cities or settlements. As a result of these comparisons, many similarities were found to present configurations of urban open spaces. Moreover, such spaces are never objectified by modern methods of landscape architecture. Various types of planning and design exist for such spaces, and these play an important role in each society, as for structures in all cultures.

The cultural context of such open spaces differs from that of Western parks and public gardens. These are objectified as ‘vernacular’ identifiable spaces.

The practical usage of such spaces from the standpoint of cultural anthropology is recommended.

Keywords: *open space, cultural anthropology, cultural pluralism, articulation, pre-space.*

1. Introduction

Reflecting on ‘modern’ uniform styles, many practices have been used to observe how people living in particular regions or countries participate in the planning and designing processes in the present day. Such approaches include noticing and exploring regional ambiguous characteristics inherent in each country. Nowadays specialists of landscape architecture frequently require a ‘vernacular’ cultural acquaintance.

In the domain of cultural anthropology or sociology, modern urban planning methods are frequently regarded as a process of ‘westernization’. Low (2005) has pointed out that in building parks it is important to endorse and to enhance the cultural diversity of the particular society constituting many cultural groups, ethnic minorities, generations, and so on living in the same area or region. From the point of enhancing cultural diversity, is the present *park-system* the pre-eminent open space for people in all cultures? Shirahata (1991) and Miyagi (2001) expressed doubt that park systems in Japan were at all needed for ordinary Japanese, because Japanese park systems had been introduced to westernize Japanese externally and had never been considered from the perspective of citizen’s independent demands.

If the *park-system* developed in a modern Western context in the way that Zucker (1970) has argued that open spaces evolved from ancient meeting places in settlements, via holy places like agoras and plazas where meetings were held, to present day urban parks and green areas, then this process would be traceable in other non-Western cultures.

How can we consider this conflict between modern methods (i.e. scientific/‘Western’), and ‘vernacular’ identity? In cultural anthropology, without any reference to whether they are ‘developed’ or ‘developing’, various cultures must be considered equally, this being termed *cultural pluralism*. This study makes a re-examination of open spaces observed in various cultures not as undeveloped institutions, but from the perspective of *cultural pluralism*. A recommendation was made to overcome the opposition between

modernism and ‘vernacularism’, or between ‘power’ and ‘the grassroots’, and so forth.

2. Methods

2-1. Sampling Data

In cultural anthropology there are a great many reports about traditional societies, which are known as ethnography. These contain catchall descriptions about social and material cultures. From such ethnographies, descriptions about open spaces in particular cultural societies were picked out. As so many ethnographies have been written throughout the world it would be unfeasible to attempt to select from them all, so a random selection was made excluding all cases built in a 'modern' time and context. The geographical location of each of the societies sampled is shown on the map in fig. 1.

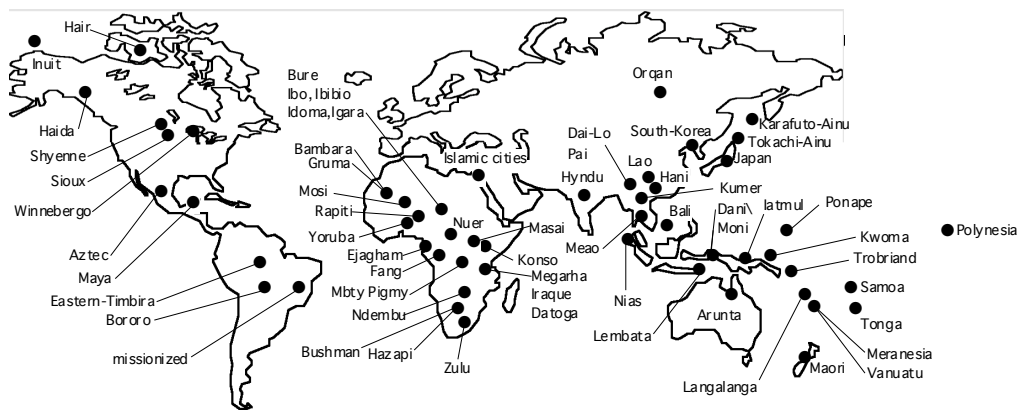


Figure.1 Geographical locations of cultures sampled

2-2. Method for Choosing and Comparing

According to the concept of *cultural pluralism*, each culture would be equal. So it is by no means a question of quantity or frequency. When selecting geographical locations particular care was taken to exclude comparisons concerning the same regional issues (climatic zone, geometry, vegetation, etc.), the same subsistence (hunting, gathering, cultivation, etc.), and the same social organisations (political institution, kinship system, etc.).

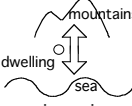
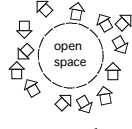
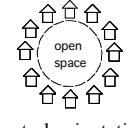
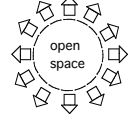
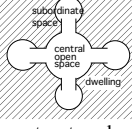

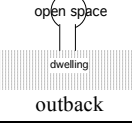
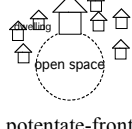

In order to further contrast with present planning and design, a comparison needs to take note of the form and location of parks or plazas. Further, not only those named as such or institutionalised as built open spaces, but also, for example, those chosen as places for the purpose of meetings, which are unmarked.

3. Results

Many types of open spaces are observed in ethnographic descriptions. Many are built like present day 'parks' and are named and paved as such facilities. However, many are kept vacant in or away from actual dwellings. These spaces are identified by making boundaries, or by marking symbolic target items. In arranging formal features, these are grouped according to bounding configurations (building orders or differences in ground surfaces), and in relation to dwellings.

The results of comparing the characteristics of forms and locations are grouped together according to the types shown in the mimetic diagram in Table 1 below, together with the names of the sampled societies.

Table 1. Types of open spaces in traditional societies

0	type	explanation	cases (tribe, region, or country name)
	void-incidental or undefined	This type would not have an identified form or location. In their outdoor activities, these societies would never use and decide upon particular spaces, or would use incidentally formatted spaces.	Banuatu ²⁴ , Bure ⁷ , Datoga ³⁹ , Moni ¹⁷ , Nuer ⁵ , Haida ⁹ , Hair ¹⁴ , Inuit ¹⁹ , Irakw ³⁹ , Khumer ¹⁹ , Langalanga ¹¹ , Lao ¹⁹ , Megarha ⁶ , Ndenbu ³⁷ , Hazapi ³⁹ , Sarawak ¹⁹ , Tonga ¹⁹ , Winnebergo ³¹ ,
1	 orientative	This type would not have an identified form. In performing outdoor rituals, the space would be oriented according to a zone referred to by some particular symbolic object specific to each society.	Arunta ²⁶ , Bali ¹⁹ , Ejagham ³² , Karafuto-Ainu ²⁹ ,
2	 central	The open space or meeting place is located at the centre of the dwelling. However the central spaces and buildings have no relation.	Dani ¹⁷ , Iatemul ³ , Kwoma ⁴ , Lembata ² , Melanesia ³⁴ , Mao(Miao) ⁴³ , Samoa ¹⁰ , Zulu ⁶ ,
3	 central-orientative	The open space or meeting place is located at the centre of the dwelling. The space making order is the same as the 'orientative' type. However at this juncture, buildings formed the boundaries of this space and would be built independently of the central space. The central spaces and buildings have no relation.	Ponape ³⁶ , Sheyenne ²² , Yoruba ³⁰ ,
4	 central-convergent	The open space or meeting place is located at the centre of the dwelling. At this juncture, buildings that formed the boundaries of this space would be built in relation to this central space. In some cases such spaces are named and recognised like native versions of European 'plazas'. However in other cases the space has no name because the native peoples do not consciously recognise it.	Arunta ²⁵ , Aztec ²⁵ , Bambara ³⁹ , Bororo ²³ , Bushman ¹⁹ , Eastern-Timbira ²⁸ , Gourmantche ³³ , Hani ³⁵ , Ibo ⁷ , Idoma ⁷ , Igala ⁷ , Masai ²⁰ , Maya ²⁵ , Mosi ³⁹ , Oroquin ¹⁸ , Rapiti ³⁹ , Sioux ³¹ , Trobriand ²⁷
4'	missionized	Colonial cities created by Spain or Portugal in South America often featured central plazas facing a church and a city hall. Nowadays such plazas have frequently been accepted by native peoples and are an important identifiable open space for them ²⁵	
5	 structured	An important open space is located at the centre of the dwelling. Other subordinate open spaces are located at the periphery of the dwelling. The central open space and the others are made with obvious relation to each other.	Hindu ¹⁵ , Islamic Cities ¹² , Ibibio ⁸ , Konso ¹³ , Polynesia ⁴² ,
6	 marginal	A blanked space is made on the margins of the dwelling. The space is not concerned as a building space.	Fang ⁶
7	 outback	The open space is made at the back of, or separate from the actual dwelling.	Japan ²¹ , Maori ¹ , Nias ⁴¹ , Samoa ¹⁰ ,
8	 potentate-front	The open space is made in front of the most important person's house in the settlement. In some cases such spaces are named and recognised like European 'plazas' for native peoples. But in other cases, the space has no name because the native peoples do not make any conscious recognition.	Dai-Lo ³⁵ , Nupe ⁷ , Tokachi-Ainu ⁴⁰ ,
9	 distinct-parallel	Two types of open spaces are located independently in the settlement. These have no relationship to the particular society.	Dai-Lo ³⁵ , Mbuti-Pygy ³⁸ , Pai ³⁴ , South Korea ³⁵ ,

4. Considerations and Recommendations

4-1. Rethinking Rational Functionality of Open Space System

The types of open spaces in Fig. 2. are ordered according to their linear cultural evolution in landscape

architecture. In previous dominant thinking as represented by Zucker (1970), symbolic open spaces are made at the centre of a community. These central spaces are divided to a little subordinate space from the centre to the periphery. Such order has continued in modern urban planning and designing. However, for some of these types (No's. 1, 6, 7, 8 & 9.) the linear evolutionary step is inapplicable. As in the case of Konso or Polynesian cultures, certain non-literal cultures have structured hierarchical open space systems similar to a Western plaza system (the same location as the *ideal city* posited by Alberti in the fifteenth century). Types No's. 6, 7 & 9 are ordered according to their same position to the present park system according to cultural pluralism and because of their institutional configuration. The other types ranked are older and are not undeveloped.

Modern rationalism or cultural evolution cannot explain such types of open spaces. Indeed, these types are difficult to observe in their points, shapes or locations because of their extraordinary differences from contemporary or Western open space systems. The order of shapes and locations are also difficult to explain. In some cultures these are explained according to cultural reasons (due to the demands of tribal identity, cosmology, social structure, etc.), as found in cultural anthropological literature. Non-rational factors tend not to be objectified in modern landscape architecture. Anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl (1923) pointed out that native peoples' thinking is adequately rational within their own cultures, and the substantial context of their 'primitive' way of thinking is not understandable to Western rationalism. He called this 'pre-logical thinking'. Following Lévy-Bruhl's theory, such open spaces could be termed and objectified as 'pre-specific' open spaces. These 'pre-spaces' are difficult to explain according to the reasoning of evolution or Western rationalism. Pre-spaces are not as irrational or seemingly backward as they may initially seem. The specific configurations are distinctive to each society and very valuable to the people those cultures. Further research of pre-spaces will bring more fruitful perspectives in open space planning and design for the conservation of cultural diversity and in order to avoid the depersonalization of regional urban design.

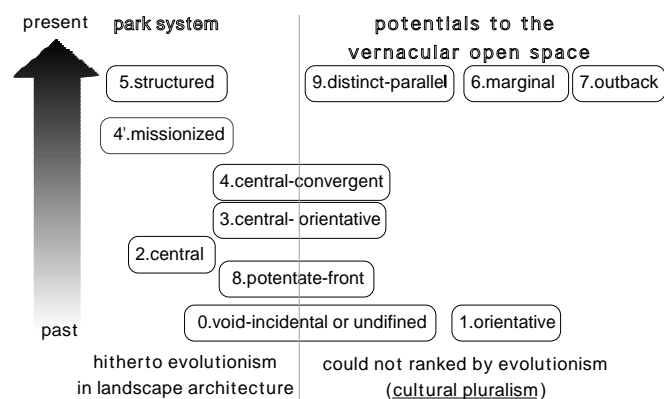


Figure.2 Plurality of various pre-spaces

4-2. Evolution and Articulation of Open Spaces

Types No. 2, 3, 4 & 5. overlie the evolution of Western open spaces according to discipline of their location where the hierarchy is from the centre to the periphery. Therefore are these types examples of a development to the present park system? In reference to such types, native peoples often welcome colonial central plazas built by Western conquerors. Low (1996) explained this from an anthropological perspective, as ancient people in South America attached a strong sense of value to the centre of the universe. Many of their dwellings had central meeting spaces in which to perform rituals. Such places were the centre of their world and were the celestial sphere for the gods residing there. They had developed a sense of central space superiority well before contact with Western influences. As a result South American native peoples welcomed the central plazas forced upon them by Western colonial

powers. They subjectively selected other external cultural issues by themselves. In cultural anthropology such a phenomenon is known as *articulation*, and is not referred to as evolution as evolution or devolution cannot fully account for such a phenomenon.

In the case of South America, it is often thought that pre-spaces that articulated to Western open space systems were locations of 'central' spaces. However, on the contrary, open spaces do not articulate in some culture. In the case of the Dani and Moni of Papua New Guinea, it can be found that these two societies live in the same village. The Dani have a central meeting space whereas the Moni do not, although the Dani people never use Moni spaces and two societies are able to conserve their own particular styles of dwelling (Ishige & Honda 1966). A central space system that is rational or functional would predict that where people are living in such a manner, Moni would utilise Dani central pre-spaces, and vice-versa. However, this is evidently not the case.

In summary, each society has its particular pre-specific order, and modern Western space systems are not identified amongst them. Undeniably, a modern rational functional method is both beneficial and important. However, in order to conserve cultural diversity, more effort must be exerted on exploring specific cultural issues of particular regions and societies. Landscape architecture professionals are apt to favour sophisticated building park systems, but a green park system is only one of many possible solutions. Rather, we must search for pre-spaces that are applicable to and endorsed by each culture and work out how to articulate the fruition of modern landscapes to people's admirable pre-specific orders. Through the adoption of cultural pluralism, undeveloped spaces become special identifiable pre-spaces for people. Thus, it is ultimately possible to be compatible with both vernacular and unique open space planning and design.

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