

Publication

Anthropology and Architecture: A Misplaced Conversation (part 1)

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The two fields-architecture and anthropology-seem to have so much to say to each other. Shelter is, after all, a universal human need. But for the most part, architecture has been satisfied with drawing on anthropology for an origin myth or two (usually something involving a primeval hut), and anthropology displays astonishingly little interest in architecture at all, even though the design and disposition of dwellings is one of the key material expressions of daily life. There have been, of course, the famous studies of vernacular architecture of the postwar period. The writing of Paul Oliver (discussed in this issue), Hassan Fathy and others documented the construction of traditional architecture. However, anthropologists seemed to go from field research in tribal settlements to performing post-occupancy evaluations in commercial towers with no intermediary theoretical phase, no reflection on how to get from one to the other. The engagement of the anthropologist with contemporary urban architecture has been surprisingly slight. Setha Low's *Theorizing the City: the New Urban Anthropology Reader* from 1999 opened with the question of "why the city has been undertheorized within anthropology", and in spite of Low's efforts, the situation has still barely changed. The two fields-architecture and anthropology-seem to have so much to say to each other. Shelter is, after all, a universal human need. But for the most part, architecture has been satisfied with drawing on anthropology for an origin myth or two (usually something involving a primeval hut), and anthropology displays astonishingly little interest in architecture at all, even though the design and disposition of dwellings is one of the key material expressions of daily life. There have been, of course, the famous studies of vernacular architecture of the postwar period. The writing of Paul Oliver (discussed in this issue), Hassan Fathy and others documented the construction of traditional architecture. However, anthropologists seemed to go from field research in tribal settlements to performing post-occupancy evaluations in commercial towers with no intermediary theoretical phase, no reflection on how to get from one to the other. The engagement of the anthropologist with contemporary urban architecture has been surprisingly slight. Setha Low's *Theorizing the City: the New Urban Anthropology Reader* from 1999 opened with the question of "why the city has been undertheorized within anthropology", and in spite of Low's efforts, the situation has still barely changed.

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