

Buildings in Society: International Studies in the Historic Era

edited by

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Cover: Store Heddinge Church, Denmark, section (see pages 113–126).

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Buildings in Society International

Introduction

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Buildings are amongst the larger artefacts created by humans, but are more than just 'machines for living in' as Le Corbusier (1927: 95) famously argued they should be. There is a continuing relationship between buildings and those who build them, those who use them and those who look upon them. Buildings may be constructed to convey meaning, but any meaning is perpetually re-defined both as the structure changes and also as society changes. People shape buildings and buildings in turn shape people's perceptions, experience and behaviour. Yet in spite of the importance of architecture in structuring our environment, the relationship between architecture and societies in the past remains poorly understood and under-theorized.

In response to the increasing pressure to create a more joined up approach to the study of buildings across disciplines, three archaeologists (two post-medievalists and one historical-archaeologist) organised, with the generous support of The Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) and the Belfast City Council, an interdisciplinary conference, Buildings in Society International (BISI) in June 2014 at QUB.

The aim of BISI was to create a forum for international experts from a variety of disciplines including archaeology, history, architectural history and heritage to discuss and to consider current new approaches to the study of buildings. The agenda was to debate the benefits of trans-historical and multi-disciplinary approaches which placed buildings in their social context and considered not only the construction of buildings, but also the responses to them over time. The speakers presented a wide range of buildings including, but not limited to, churches, houses, castles, prisons and asylums and drew upon examples from the twelfth to the twenty-first century from across America, Australia and Europe.

This volume arose out of selected papers presented at the conference, but has been augmented with invited chapters to provide a more rounded overview of the state of the study. The chapters fall in to four different defined sections, yet address similar themes such as domestic space, theoretical approaches, buildings and

power, buildings and symbolism and identity. Together, they generate a valuable new insight into the study of buildings in the historic period.

The first chapter in this volume engages with the fundamental question, what is building history? Mark Gardiner examines the roots of building history and explores the issues in studying buildings as monuments representing the past. He concludes that building history embraces multiple approaches to built structures including their relationship to society and should therefore be considered as artefacts with many meanings.

The chapters under 'Domestic Space' investigate the way in which building materials, architectural forms and features informed on social identity and expressed the beliefs of those who lived there. Jonathan Duck's chapter looks at the uses of niches as having both a practical and spiritual function in domestic buildings in eastern England during the post-medieval period. Using archaeology, architectural and documentary evidence he considers how an individual's spiritual values came to be expressed within the fabric of a home. Lia Tsesmeli's chapter focuses on the architectural remains of a settlement in Hummingbird Pueblo, New Mexico from the early thirteenth century to the mid-fifteenth century and explores how temporal and spatial diversity of architectural form, construction methods and internal organisation of built space can reveal how a population has to evolve and adapt to changing social conditions in the way in which they shape their environment.

The second section of the volume, 'Urban and Village Spaces' engages with the way in which archaeology, the study of architecture with the documentary record can be used to meaningfully examine the built environment. Göran Tagesson and Andrine Nilsen analyse evidence from the archaeological and standing buildings record from Swedish towns during the medieval and early modern period. A multi-disciplinary approach is also used by Caroline Goodson to explore the remains of a monastery and abbey church of the tenth to thirteenth century as well as the village where the monastery's

estate workers lived. Goodson suggests that the site at Villamanga can be used to explore how buildings may have been experienced by a community over time.

The third section in this volume, 'Buildings and Identity' explore how expressions of identity can be recognised in built structures. Ash Lenton examines the phenomenological or buildways of architectural grammar as one way to interpret the social groupings. Lenton uses the example of medieval Córdoba's (Spain) religious architecture to interpret the actions of ethnically aware people. Eve Campbell investigates the idea of ethnic identity in buildings, examining the conception that the vernacular stone thatched dwelling in Ireland represented 'Irishness' itself. She suggests that the buildings of the underground gentry were hybrid in character, and their dwellings which emerge in a distinct colonial context, held ambivalent and divergent meanings. They were built in a way which reflected older traditions, but were the products of people creating a space in an ever changing society. Paul Mitchell examines the origins of Viennese apartment buildings and drawing on evidence both from architects' plans and from on-site analysis.

The final papers explore approaches to buildings other than urban or rural dwellings, including churches, public institutions and castles. Leif Plith Lauritsen shows the importance of challenging traditionally held views of buildings and reinterpreting them to reveal the truth of the buildings function. Katherine Weikert examines how spatial and access analysis can be used to reinterpret Anglo-Norman keeps. She argues that the role of spatial planning and structures remains unexplored and with further investigations could reveal how space was intended to display or indeed hide symbols of social authority. The final paper of the volume by Susan Piddock considers how buildings and their use form the material culture, which then can be used to examine attitudes to certain groups of people. She explores what life was like for those living in penal colonies of Tasmania and Western Australia, and concludes how the built environments can reveal much about the gap between the rhetoric of care and the reality of living within the asylum.

A Way forward?

As has been discussed, the study of buildings is a rapidly expanding scholarly field due to increasing pressure to create a more joined up approach to the study of buildings across the disciplines. The move to a more diverse way of approaching buildings was identified in *Dwellings, Identities and Homes*, a conference held in 2010 with a subsequent publication which debated approaches in the field of medieval housing culture. It too summarised that there had been a 'diversity of

approaches' in the way buildings have been examined within different scholarly fields. It concluded that interdisciplinary research with careful theorisation will be one of the greatest challenges but exciting areas of future research within the subject (Giles and Kristiansen 2014: 9-10). Future research must adequately capture the complexity of the relationship between humans and buildings, and examine whether it is multi-faceted so that it will consistently evade generalizing theories. Contextual interpretation may provide richer and more nuanced approaches.

The discussion in this book reflects the latest approaches to the study of buildings from the historic period. This volume does not examine buildings as architecture, but adopts an archaeological perspective to consider them as artefacts, reflecting the needs of those who commissioned them. It is fundamentally important to consider the historical context in which buildings were constructed and equally to consider their subsequent uses and interpretations. Studies have sometimes failed to seriously consider the historical contexts in which the buildings were constructed and how they were subsequently used and interpreted. The papers in this volume situate their interpretation in their social context. Buildings can inform us about past cultures as they are responsive and evolve to meet people's needs over time. Many of the papers show that as scholars, we need to recognize that architecture has conscious and unconscious intentions, and buildings have a diversity of meanings beyond their actual function. Those meanings may be mis/understood, resisted or denied by those experiencing the building, through habitation or use. Buildings (from conception to construction and reconstruction) exist in different times – being re-structured, re-thought and re-experienced by subsequent generations. They are not static objects but have a dynamic biography. Buildings do not have a single meaning, but multiple and changing meanings.

Approaching the study of buildings in a trans-historical and multi-disciplinary approach is still in its infancy within the academic field, however, it is required in order to create a clearer definition of what buildings were, what they meant, and how this evolved not only on a local level but also at a regional and international stage. Buildings have countless layers which hide symbolism and ideas that we are only just beginning to understand. We must embrace different scholarly strands to fully decipher the code and truly appreciate how these buildings were intended to be seen, how they portrayed contemporary attitudes, social organisation and tastes.

The volume is unified not simply by the study of buildings, but also by a perspective which looks at the interaction between people and societies more

generally, and the built structures they have created. It considers the design of the buildings, their role, and how they were flexible enough to evolve and grow as their function changed and as the needs of those who owned or used the buildings also developed. It emphasises the need for further international multi-disciplinary approaches in order to understand how ideas, styles, approaches and designs spread over time and space. In short, we must consider a new approach to the study of buildings and the study of the relationships which societies have with buildings.

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