Built Form and Three Cultural Tendencies: Nostalgia, Presentism and Anticipation

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This paper examines the effect of cultural orientation on the built forms of various societies. It proposes a distinction between societies that are primarily nostalgic, presentist, or anticipatory. Examples from Africa and elsewhere are used to show how such cultural orientation has had an effect on built form and overall cultural outlook. The rise of anticipatory views among Western societies has helped bring a revolution in favor of leisure activities. Among other things, this promises profound advances in respect for women and the environment. As societies become more anticipatory, the threat of war also becomes more muted. To be fully realized, however, such advantages need to be spread more equitably across world cultures.

This essay presents a comparison of societies based not only on a cultural but also a temporal orientation. It examines differences in balance between social perspectives based on the idealized continuities of history (nostalgia), the compelling pressures of the moment (presentism), and the capacity to plan for the future (anticipation).

In terms of built form, cultures differ significantly in terms of whether they are primarily nostalgic, primarily presentist, or primarily anticipatory. For the purposes of this paper, one might call this a theory of triple temporality.

Cultures of nostalgia develop distinctive features which set them apart from cultures of presentism. And these, in turn, have a different emphasis from cultures of anticipation. I will begin by describing each of these.

BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND PRESENTISM

Cultures of nostalgia exhibit great sensitivity to tradition and custom, and their built forms show strong continuities of style — a persistent conservatism. Such cultures also lean toward ancestor-reverence and a special interpretation of the meaning of immortality.
In such cultures nobody is completely dead for as long as his or her blood flows in the veins of the living, the veins of his or her descendants. (In modern terms one might say nobody is completely dead for as long as their genes may still be passed to living progeny.)

O joy! That in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!

In some African cultures such a societal orientation often means that the dead are buried beneath the homes of their living relatives, or in close proximity to them. Built form in these cultures thus often accommodates not only the living, but also the living dead (those with descendants) — or even the terminally dead (those without direct descendants). Often within the same built form in these societies, the extended family may be said to extend beyond the grave.

Cultures of nostalgia are generally characterized by a strong elder tradition — conferring respect and authority on the elderly, and presuming that wisdom comes from the accumulation of experience. In terms of built form, room size will often be tied to this orientation, with elders being accorded larger rooms than more junior members of a family or clan.

In Africa and parts of the Arab world family relations sometimes encompass polygamous relationships. Polygamous architecture seeks to accommodate a plurality of wives within a single structure or compound. Monogamous architecture may coexist with polygamous designs within the same traditionalist way of life.

Forms of architecture themselves may be nostalgic — even when the culture that produces them is beginning to “modernize.” Thus, the original public buildings of Washington, D.C., reflected a nostalgia for the Classical styles of Greece and Rome. Later memorials to great American leaders — the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial — have also showed the influence of nostalgia for the Euro-classics.

Revivalist architecture is fundamentally nostalgic. This in apparent in the public buildings in Washington, D.C. One can also see it in the number of towns with names like Athens, Syracuse, Ithaca, etc., which demonstrate a similar societal nostalgia for the Greco-Roman age.

Cross-cultural nostalgia can also be neocolonial. Such is the case with the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Ivory Coast, the tallest structure of its kind in the world. A few years before the completion of this structure, Emperor Bokassa of what was then the Central African Empire also had dreamed of building an African Versailles. His monumental plans were thwarted before they could be realized, however, when his government was overthrown by French troops. The country is now called the Central African Republic.

By contrast to cultures of nostalgia, cultures of presentism are driven by values of the here and now. Nevertheless, such cultures may be “modern” in some of the worst senses of the term. In search of short-term economic gain, they may be characterized by a reckless disregard for long-term environmental conditions and by their embrace of consumerism.

Western versions of cultures of presentism have an abiding faith in market forces. They also have a deep distrust of long-term planning. In recent times Western presentism has drifted towards consumerism, and one result has been environmentally costly built forms. Likewise, a presentist orientation has also often resulted in a pattern of ostentatious consumption among the Westernized elites of formerly colonized countries. Their presentism has resulted in extravagantly constructed homes and a reckless indifference to the depletion of both national and natural resources.

Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, once argued that civilization was born out of the pursuit of luxury — hence, the silk trade and the golden road to Samarkand. Adam Smith argued that the wealth of nations was created out of the pursuit of profit — hence, the triumph of the British in the Industrial Revolution. Karl Marx argued that the engine of history was the pursuit of surplus — hence, the rise of newer and newer classes in the dialectic of history.

But apart from North Africa and the Nile Valley, precol- olnial Africans were never driven by the pursuit of luxury (à la Russell), nor the pursuit of profit (à la Smith), nor the pursuit of surplus (à la Marx). One might say precol onial Africans suffered from an underdeveloped greed structure.

Such a greed deficit had its consequences for the built forms of precolonical Africa. Dwellings were simple, often minimalist. And outside North Africa and the Nile Valley, the continent had no monumental culture of the kind that could produce the Taj Mahal, the Palace of Versailles, or the temples of ancient Cambodia.

BETWEEN ANTICIPATION AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE

The third category of cultural orientation is that of anticipa- tion. Anticipation can be either sacred or secular. Cultures of secular anticipation may plan cities in ways that are sensitive to the needs of the next generation, and the one after that. And new towns or new cities may be built in anticipation of new residents.

Such a societal orientation can also produce strange results: a deserted city is normally one from which the inhab- itants have left, but Yamoussoukro in Ivory Coast looks deserted because its inhabitants have not yet arrived! It was built by the founder-president of the country, around the vil- lage where he was born. Was Yamoussoukro built in anticip- ation of its role as a future capital — or in response to the vanity of a president? Perhaps both factors were at play.

For their part, cultures of sacred anticipation invest in future salvation rather than future materiality. The pharaohs of Egypt displayed such an anticipatory orientation when
they built pyramids and equipped their secret burial chambers with everything they would need in the Hereafter. Sometimes they built to imitate God at His most flamboyant.

Other societies have provided more recent examples of grand anticipation of the Hereafter — in the form of cathedrals, mosques, temples and basilicas.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

Socialism in the twentieth century has also attempted to be a culture of anticipation. At its best it has attempted to reduce inequalities in anticipation of a classless utopia in the distant future. Thus, in Tanzania Julius K. Nyerere experimented with the policies of Ujamaa from 1967 until 1985, committed to the pursuit of socialism, self-reliance, and the combating of corruption.

Unlike the Kenyan elite, the Tanzanian elite during these years of discipline were more modest in their built-form aspirations. On the other hand, the Tanzanian government under Nyerere made the expensive decision to build a new capital in Dodoma. Once again, socialism showed its glaring contradictions — economizing in its leadership code, appearing extravagant in its macro-aspirations for a new capital. Its built form indicated tendencies in both directions.

In Ivory Coast, the city of Yamoussoukro poses questions about the culture of anticipation. Is a city built before there are people to inhabit it based on too much anticipation? Planning is certainly one aspect of the culture of anticipation. But this city now includes not only five-star hotels without many residents, but also the largest church in Africa without many worshipers.

Although this essay does not include a photograph of this church — the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace — it is worth noting that it cost nearly $300 million. The dome is 380 feet high, and the whole building reaches 525 feet above the ground, supported by 60 columns. It has 36 massive stained-glass windows and a capacity to seat 7,000 people, with standing room for an additional 10,000. But where are the worshipers? Where are the Catholics in the country? Is this anticipation gone mad?

If one continues to examine the cultures of Africa with an eye toward these distinctions, one must also distinguish between cultures of almost indestructible built forms and cultures of perishable structures.

In North Africa, built forms have long survived the cultures which produced them. Thus, the pyramids long outlasted the culture of the pharaohs. But the opposite is true in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, the cultures have long outlasted the buildings they erected.

One might say that North Africa is distinguished by the paradox of resilient built forms and perishable cultures. In Egypt, Greek, Roman and Ottoman cultures have come and gone, leaving behind stone monuments. But in sub-Saharan Africa a reverse paradox emerged: one of resilient cultures and perishable built forms. Here, societies have produced only simple buildings which last but a few generations, while the cultures themselves seem to have withstood the test of time — at least until the twentieth century. According to one Black poet:

My negritude [my blackness] is no tower and no cathedral,
It delves into the deep red flesh of the soil.
Hooray for those who never invented anything
Who never explored anything
Who never discovered anything!
Hooray for joy, hooray for love
Hooray for the pain of incarnate tears.

An intermediate case study is that of ancient Zimbabwe. Ancestors of the present Shona people of Zimbabwe once had a civilization of stone built forms. But at a certain time they appeared to change their minds and return to the use of more perishable building materials. Today, even after the culture of ancient Zimbabwe has died out, their stone walls endure. By contrast, the more recent Shona culture has endured far longer than the buildings they have constructed.

It is ancient Zimbabwe, however, that has given its name to a modern nation which once carried the imperial title of Rhodesia. The word zimbabwe, itself, means “building with stones.”

Even when building materials are solid, the built forms of a society may not endure if they are glaringly inconsistent with the prevailing culture. Many new skyscrapers in present-day Africa are turning out to be more perishable than the brooding majesty of ancient Zimbabwe. As rust and erosion set in, African skyscrapers battle not only the climate but also local cultural resistance to architectural colonialism and imperialism.

What is architectural colonialism? It is an attitude toward building which seeks to mold people in the image of buildings, rather than have the buildings reflect the image of the people. Architectural colonialism is a form of foreign penetration, colonizing the skyline, annexing the horizon with alien shapes.

Sometimes such buildings perform functions which result in fundamental cultural changes. But at other times architectural colonialism simply causes the waste of local building materials for alien structures, or the extravagant importation of foreign building materials for local structures.

At its worst, architectural colonialism is not only insensitive to the cultural environment, it is also inadequately attentive to the physical environment. Sometimes this involves an aesthetic violation of both the cultural and physical environment — a building which violates the historical ambiance of a neighborhood, for example. Such violations become imperialist if they are hegemonic and cross-cultural.

At other times it may involve just too much construction at once — as on the coast of Kenya (where it has destroyed the skyline and the green fields), or in the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries. Too much investment in built form! Booms such as these may be a bonanza for construction companies and architects. But they become imperialist when they are based on alliances between local elites and exploitative alien forces.
What may start as imperialist architecture can, over time, become indigenized when the rest of the culture changes. In some parts of the world (including Egypt) Islamic architecture began this way. Before the Arab conquest of the seventh century A.D., Egypt was neither Muslim nor Arab. Yet, over time, Islamic architecture has become indigenized in Egypt, as Egyptians have become Islamized in religion and Arabized in language and identity.

Imperialist architecture can be de-colonized in one of two ways: either when the architecture itself is changed to conform to the local culture, or when the culture is changed to conform to the architecture.

LEISURE CULTURE: NOSTALGIC, PRESENTIST AND ANTICIPATORY

The aim of this essay is not just to address culture as a factor in built forms, but to provide a more comprehensive cultural perspective on construction. I use “culture” here not only in its aesthetic sense, but also in its wider sociological sense.

How does leisure relate to all these issues? Leisure is one of the great neglected issues in the sociology of built forms. But here one must first distinguish between elite leisure and popular leisure. Throughout history, elite leisure has been a great force in the arts — resulting in aristocratic patronage for all forms of architectural and ornamental creativity. Great cathedrals like St. Paul’s in London and St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, great palaces like Versailles, and great memorials like the Taj Mahal are at the top of this genre. Patronage for the arts can be nostalgic, presentist or anticipatory. But what can be said about such playgrounds as Sun City in South Africa?

Over the years, the upper-middle-class love for opera, ballet and theater has produced magnificent class-specific built forms like the Sidney Opera House in Australia. Patronage of classical composers and playwrights has also been class specific. But much of what privileged leisure has produced has been acquired on the backs of workers, serfs, peasants — and sometimes slaves. The built forms of high culture emanate from the toil and sweat of low culture.

In the twentieth century, however, in addition to these class-specific constructions, a process of leisure universalization has appeared in the industrialized world that incorporates a vision of leisure for every man and woman. The trend is different from just popular culture. So far, its most striking beneficiaries have been the ecology and women.

Protectiveness of the ecology is a significant outcome of the universalization of leisure. Suddenly, Northerners have time to enjoy the environment — the hills and valleys, the forests, the animals and the birds. But this requires restraint in construction, sometimes a retreat to the smaller scale of yesteryear. The need increases to use replenishable materials, like wood, instead of stone.

Of course, the battle to protect the environment is still uneven. But the most powerful friend of the environment in the northern hemisphere is leisure time for the enjoyment of beauty. Planning to save beauty has only just begun to have an impact. Through mass campaigns, struggles have been waged to save the seal, the whale, and the elephant. But campaigns have yet to appear to save the exotic snake or lizard. Perhaps, as part of its drive to protect a wider ecological equilibrium, the culture of anticipation should be sensitive to these creatures, too.

Women have also been great beneficiaries of the leisure revolution. Women in less privileged societies have become less and less the mere objects of masculine pastimes. In fact, male possessiveness can be shown to decline with the diversification of leisure options, or even sex options. Rules begin to relax, and women are no longer oppressed to fight. Consider India’s experiment with the mobile cinema in quest of diversification of pastimes. The best contraceptive is an alternative to sex.

One reason why the most liberated women in the world are in the West may well be the advance of the leisure revolution and its attendant relaxation of gender tensions and sexual monopoly.

The leisure revolution also blurs the distinction between the bread-winner and the homemaker. Fast food reduces kitchen chores. The bread-winner is not too tired to help. The home can become an arena of domestic partnership.

Like other oppressed people, women fight back not when they are at their most repressed, but when the system is opening up. Fighting for rights is then no longer a luxury that the hard-pressed can ill afford to pursue. In the West it is now less and less unusual to find homes with two studies — one for the husband and one for the wife.

How does the leisure revolution relate to peace? In the long run a lot depends on whether the liberation of women will go so far as to androgynize the war machine. One enemy of both buildings and the environment is war — although its biggest cost is in human lives.

In cultures which are otherwise vastly different from each other, war has been preeminently a masculine game. So, too, has been violent crime. Making women joint decision-makers on matters of war and peace could make a major difference in these areas.

Would there be fewer wars if women were joint decision-makers? Would an androgynized war machine save lives, buildings, and the environment? Should a culture of anticipation seek to avert war?

The skeptic can point to situations where women have been in charge of nation-states and proven to be as warlike as men. Margaret Thatcher, Golda Mier, and Indira Gandhi spring to mind. But Margaret Thatcher was a macho woman in a male-dominated system. So were Golda Mier and Indira Gandhi. Chances are that if a culture of anticipation aimed toward a better gender balance in terms of access to all instruments of power, this might affect the quality of decisions and policies.

Some say war is politics militarized. But war is also play militarized — masculine play. Gang warfare among male teenagers is an intermediate step between individual boys fighting with fists primordially and such eyeball-to-eyeball conflicts as the Cuban missile crisis. The skills to destroy life, homes, and the environment are learned in the violent presentism of street gangs.
The question then arises: will the expansion of leisure eventually demilitarize play? Play used to be culturally age specific—an activity of the young, with the elders mainly serving as spectators. But play in the northern hemisphere has now become increasingly age neutral. Almost no one is too old to play, and the range of games today widely accommodates the less agile. Gymnasiums, tennis and basketball courts, football arenas, casinos, and public swimming pools are only a few of the forms that are being widely built in the northern hemisphere to accommodate play for people of all ages.

This universalization of play raises questions about the future legitimacy of war. Will play in the next century become less inflammable into war? Probably on its own this cultural shift will not be enough. But when it is reinforced by the liberation of women and the androgynization of the war machine, the warrior factor in the human condition may at last be tamed—perhaps even civilized. Nostalgia may at last be restrained by anticipation.

There are, of course, occasions when leisure culture is not environmentally friendly. As sports, hunting and fishing can be ecologically depleting. And huge sporting developments can have damaging effects on their surroundings. But today the leisure revolution is unfolding deceptively, almost unnoticed—a silver lining to ecological clouds, a glimpse of hope to women in distress, and a shimmering promise at the end of the tunnel for a war-weary world.

TOWARD A MORE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF LEISURE

This article has tried to outline some of the issues in the unexplored agenda of built forms and architecture. The skill differential in technological advancement has been grossly underestimated as a destabilizing force in world arrangements. And the stratification of the world into nuclear haves and have-nots poses its own deep and divisive dilemmas for those concerned with the culture of anticipation and of human survival.

But just as there is a need for a more equitable distribution of skills between North and South, there is need for a more equitable distribution of leisure. Third World kids do not have enough time to play—let alone Third World workers. Because they start work at an early age, children in the Third World have too few preproductive years. So too are people’s postproductive years too limited, because too many adults die young. Universalized leisure also requires investments in built form.

Economic justice needs an equation which includes leisure opportunities for both Southerners and Northerners. Meanwhile, advocates for peace pray for the day when the legacy of leisure is a pacifying force in world affairs, a conserving force environmentally, an equalizing principle between genders—without abandoning an occasional stadium for the Olympic games. Once again in such a world, built form may reflect the heartbeat of social change and human sensibility.

REFERENCE NOTES

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