

Patterns of Urban Societies - Introduction

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Since Gordon Childe drew attention to aspects of the 'Urban Revolution'¹ (1928, 1950), it has been called 'the single most momentous social transition on the road to the modern era of states, empires, and global processes'². Urban environments have remained high on the agenda of scholars of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean and for good reason. Although less complex forms of social organisation also produced accomplishments in art, architecture, and administration, the fullest elaboration of these only took place within urban environments, which served as a kind of hothouse for experimentation. Why is this? Cities are, in Giddens' words³, 'containers of power', arenas where elites can both acquire and exercise authority, while serving as the very medium through which this control is communicated⁴. As soon as people concentrate in larger numbers within a limited area for varying reasons (e.g. subsistence, trade, religion⁵), a chain reaction occurs, affecting both the fabric of the community itself and the surrounding countryside. Social power – the ability to influence or resist others – is the basic, common element in politics, economics, religion and all other social relationships. It is possessed by all individuals and social groups and arises out of their connections to each other. 'Robinson Crusoe, marooned on a desert island, didn't have to deal with it until he met Friday'⁶. To control the exercise of social power, societies create specific settings and architectural frames, giving that power a strong spatial character⁷. These settings can be very diverse and comprise the creation of large courts, paved or stepped streets, drainage systems, boundary walls, zoned districts, whether functional or status derived, ceremonial areas, fountains, wells, food production and/or distribution centers, windows of appearance, major monumental complexes, etc. Some may be considered as direct signifiers of power, others do so indirectly. George Cowgill has called such settings 'public amenities'⁸ but perhaps they are better labelled 'urbanistic devices'. Of course, these devices are basically practical; they allow people to live together, to gather, to celebrate, to keep their feet dry and to be interconnected, to be fed and have their thirst quenched. Because of the concentration of people, however, they also facilitate co-habitation. They distinguish the urban from the rural. They also presuppose the existence of some kind of central authority whether abstract/corporate or discrete/individualising. The mere presence of some of these 'urbanistic devices', even when not in actual use, can be considered a sign of specific social

¹ Childe 1928 ; 1950.

² M. Smith 2003, 321.

³ Giddens 1984, 262.

⁴ Also Herzog 1997, 7.

⁵ A. Smith 2003.

⁶ http://www.co-intelligence.org/CIPol_democSocPwrAnal.html accessed on 5/6/2013.

⁷ Herzog 1997, 6.

⁸ Cowgill 2004.

practices intimately connected with the encoded space; indications of an aspired social landscape. The 'urbanistic device' or the building was, in this way, a 'power-laden being'⁹, and an artefact functioning like a person. Moreover, because 'of the recursive relationship between architectural forms and beliefs, it is also an ideal means for propagating and sustaining ideological beliefs'¹⁰. Urbanistic devices both affect and are affected by the political process. As such, architecture not only provides the physical settings for social interaction but is also instrumental in maintaining, generating and recreating it through processes of socialization¹¹. To some degree, specific social relations may have developed whereas architectural settings may have been slow to follow, or vice-versa, modifications in settings may have brought forward new types of social relations. Urban environments are thus ideal settings to study how power relations are reflected in society as individuals or groups aspiring to higher status will primarily use urban institutions both to effect and reflect their aspirations. The social power of the urban environment is accentuated through performance and practice. This type of socio-architectural approach involves a simultaneous examination of both the social world and the material world, a topic which, in recent years, has received some attention in the volumes *Constructing Power - Architecture, Ideology and Social Practice*¹² and *Architecture and Power*¹³. While the encoded meanings of a given architectural form are not always readily apparent¹⁴ it is nonetheless a truism that all ancient societies used their architecture to explain and display the origin and control of political and social power within their own cosmological understanding of their civilisation; indeed, Architecture is Power...

⁹ Walker & Schiffer 2006, 70.

¹⁰ Ladefoged 1998, 59.

¹¹ Hillier & Hanson 1984 ; Samson 1990.

¹² Maran, Juwig, Schwengel & Thaler 2006.

¹³ Bretschneider, Van Lerberghe & Driessen 2007.

¹⁴ Moore 1996.

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