

Meryra's Tomb and Thirdspace at Amarna

Introduction

This paper explores whether Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace (Soja, 2010, p. 363), little applied in ancient contexts, has the potential to afford greater insight to the lived experience of the rock cut tombs of the elite (Arp-Neumann, 2020, p. 1) at the ancient Egyptian archaeological site of Amarna (Fig.1.).



Figure 1. a view of the Amarna plateau, from the Nile at right, central plateau and cliffs at left (Tully, et al., 2020, p. 26)

It presents an assessment of context and tomb commonalities, incorporating a more detailed view of Tomb 04, one of the most complete attributed to Meryra (Davies, 1903)  'The High Priest of the Aten' (Arp-Neumann, 2020, p. 22). Tomb 04 is of interest given the fact that the city's architect, Akhenaten, the tenth king of the 18th Dynasty, set out to reject the prevailing god Amun, and its powerful priesthood, within his 'politico-religious reforms' (David, 2021, p. 2).

These tombs are in various stages of completion, and, despite suffering degradation, remain the 'sole coherent contexts still standing' (David, 2021, p. 6) for the period; although likely never used to house

the dead, their design and decoration a source for the study of its history, religion and art (Arp-Neumann, 2020, p. 1). Since the tombs discovery in 1824 (David, 2021, p. 3), scholarship on them is 'relatively rare' (Arp-Neumann, 2020, p. 1) with Davies work from 1903-08 still their standard reference (Davies, 1903, 1905a, 1905b, 1906, 1908a, 1908b). Often heavily decorated in an environment where art and architecture was central to thought and action, they are intentionally placed in cliffs to the North and South, adjacent to the plateau city-scape. The necropolis was referred to as 'Mountain of the East' (Arp-Neumann, 2020, p. 2) in Akhenaten's city plan, incorporated from the city's outset in its first set of boundary stelae, variously described by Akhenaten as 'the place of favour', 'favourites' or 'justification', (Murnane & Van Siclen III, 1993) (Murnane, 1995). They are an integral part of an urban plan that would still, at its core, be familiar to Soja as he developed his theory of Thirdspace in the urbanity of the Los Angeles of the 1980s and 1990s (Soja, 1989, 1996). Prima facie, Thirdspace, drawing on a rich seam of prior spatial theory, may be a useful tool to explore the lived experience of these elite tombs, elusive using traditional historicist methods, and consider further what that may reveal. Soja intended Thirdspace to be inclusive, and, this exploration is briefly augmented by attention to other spatial theorists such as Casey (Casey, 1996), and Foucauldian notions of heterotopia (Foucault, 1986); testing the model's efficacy in beginning to develop an experiential appreciation of these spaces.

Context

In c.1347 BCE 300km south of modern Cairo, midway between the ancient Egyptian cities of Memphis and Thebes (Stevens, 2016, pp. 1-2), the 18th Dynasty king, Akhenaten, founded a new city (Fig.2) he named Akhetaten,  , 'The Horizon of the Sun's Disc' (Kemp, 2013, p. 17) or 'Aten's Abode of Light' (David, 2021, p. 2). The city of between c. 20,000 and 50,000 people (Kemp, 2013, p. 17) appears to have been abandoned within 12-15 years (Stevens, 2016, p. 1), co-terminate with his death, or shortly thereafter (Kemp, 2013, p. 17).

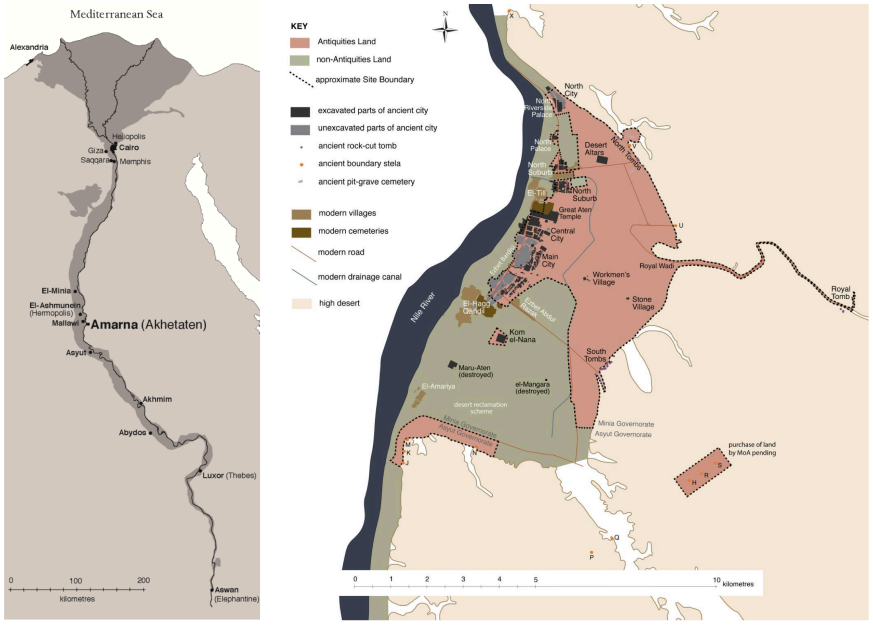


Figure 2. (Left) Location of Amarna, Egypt (Tully, et al., 2020, p. 22) (Right) Plan of Amarna (Tully, et al., 2020, p. 26)

Akhenaten was, and remains, a divisive figure, his overt preoccupation with, and elevation of, solar rays, 'the Aten' as 'the one God' and his personal conflation with the Aten, he and his wife being the only ones able to commune with it in a firmly polytheistic society, has led to his description in some scholarship as a 'heretic of the time', leading a religious 'revolution' (Hornung, 1992, p. 43), the first 'monotheist' (Stevens, 2016, p. 1) and founder of a new religion (Hornung, 1992, p. 43). Certainly, soon after his death, the heretical label would appear substantiated by the systematic obliteration of his image, alongside the reinstatement of the powerful Amun priesthood and god Amun. The 'revolutionary', 'monotheistic' element to commentary, largely developed in the 19th and 20th centuries by Western scholars, may say more about the Cartesian, western perspective of religion and its preoccupation with the separation of religion from daily life, alongside an inherent predisposition to favour monotheistic religious thought in a milieu dominated by Christianity, Islam and Judaism. It seems unrepresentative of an ancient Egypt, where there was no separate word or concept of *religion*; this *was simply life*, and I agree that the attributes of the 'first monotheist' and leading a 'religious revolution' can be legitimately disputed as overstatement. Akhenaten seems more likely to have

decided to develop a theme his father Amenhotep III adopted, elevating the sun, in the pantheon of Egyptian gods; the sun always having been present but not necessarily pre-eminent, as a way of emphasising his ontological importance, at the same time clawing back power previous generations lost to the Amun priesthood. This combined with the existence at the site of other gods, such as Bast, alongside a representation of the King and his wife receiving the Aten's rays, within a household context, suggests other gods, at least in the non-elite class, were tolerated. However, what *is* clear is Akhenaten deliberately elevated the Aten, and his and his wife Nefertiti's relationship with it, forming a new divine triad, thereby legitimising his rule, with the city site well described as 'the cult home of the Aten' (Stevens, 2016, p. 1). The city plan, textual and material culture embodying Akhenaten's unique political and theological doctrine (Meyers, 1985, p. 36), Atenism, in which the Aten  and his singular relationship to it, was the central tenet, rejecting the pre-eminent god Amun  and its powerful priesthood (Meyers, 1985, p. 35) that threatened to obviate the supreme authority of the king.

Private Rock Cut Tombs of Amarna

Fifty rock-cut tombs have been given designations in the foothills and bluffs on the eastern boundary of Amarna, a North grouping, a South grouping and Royal Tombs that extend along the 'Royal Wadi' (Arp-Neumann, 2020, p. 1) mid-way between the two through which the sun rises, central to the Amarna's location.

Physical Structure & Relief Network

The tombs are cut horizontally high on the cliffs in the North Group and on a downward slope in the lower foothills in the South Group, both from 'living rock' (Arp-Neumann, 2020, p. 1). Despite wide variations in size, shapes and stages of completion, Davies' studies identified three tomb types; T-

Shaped, columned hall and hall without columns (Davies, 1905a, p. 7), Meyers confirms all three share the same components, 'an entrance façade, main chamber (sometimes followed by a second chamber) and a shrine niche', employing essentially the same form, the only material 'difference being the length at which the traverse room occurs' (Meyers, 1985, p. 37) (Fig. 3).

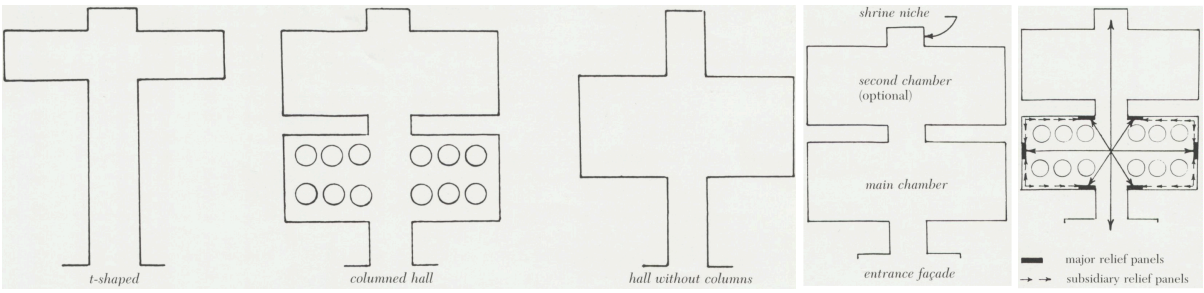


Figure 3. (Left) Amarna Tomb Types, (Mid-Right) Component Tomb Units, (Right) Tomb Relief Sequences (Meyers, 1985, p. 37).

To a greater or lesser extent, depending on stage of completion, financial means of the original owner, and state of preservation, intricate reliefs occupy many of the walls, however, their broad themes are always 'Akhenaten's political authority and religious doctrine of Atenism' (Meyers, 1985, p. 37).

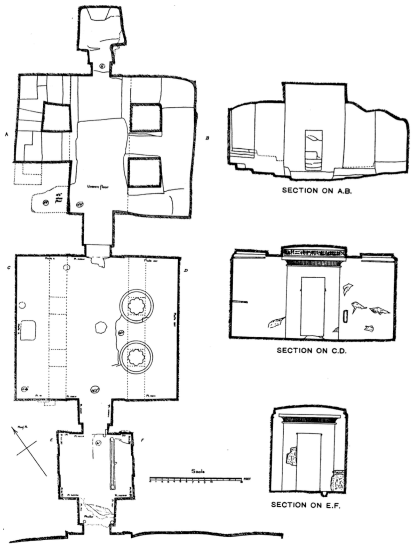


Figure 4. Arial and sectional details of Meryra's Tomb (Davies, 1903, p. Plate I)

Tomb shape variations do not alter the substance of the relief content 'in principle or function' (Meyers, 1985, p. 38). When reliefs are 'read' with the order of the structure's component parts, it is clear there is a unified, consistent hierarchical structure to the entire tomb (Meyers, 1985, p. 37).

Before referencing the content of the reliefs, I agree with Meyers that this *space* is designed 'to create explicit links' (Meyers, 1985, p. 37) between the viewer and the space; clear in Meryra's Tomb (04) (Fig.4); a dynamism easily overlooked in processual archaeology. Here 'every possible line of vision…has been pre-established to orient the viewer in space and therefore assert the thematic order' (Meyers, 1985, p. 37). Fig. 3 (at right) shows the axial plan of the tombs, each line of sight predetermined to focus on major relief panels and continue to subsidiary reliefs. There are repeated features in doorways and close columns delineate a wider transverse aisle from which the whole is designed to be viewed in *space*. The columns form an important attention directing device and are not structural as these tombs are excavated from living rock. They also *require* the viewer to observe the reliefs from a 'frontal position' (Meyers, 1985, p. 38) not only augmenting the experience of the space and view of the reliefs, but also appearing designed to be suggestive of actual architectural spaces depicted within the reliefs of the Royal city, a sophisticated 'architectural analogy' (Meyers, 1985, p. 38) that would transport the viewer of the time to known elements of Akhetaten, or more likely elements under construction, while suspending them within this pseudo city space, inside the Tomb.

In addition, the viewer's line of sight and focus on the relief panels is consistently directed towards the main panel (A in Fig.5), seen in Meryra's Tomb (04) (Fig. 6) with the subsidiary panels facing toward the main scene, leading the viewer to the main scene. This directorial device is repeated in doorways with relief figures facing the direction the viewer is intended to take, either towards the inner shrine or out of the tomb, with corner reliefs subdividing the spaces and delineating separate chambers.

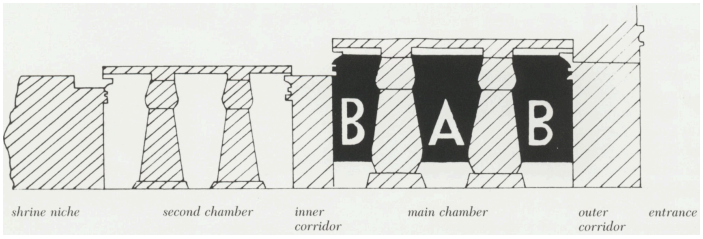


Figure 5. Longitudinal Section of Tomb (Meyers, 1985, p. 38).

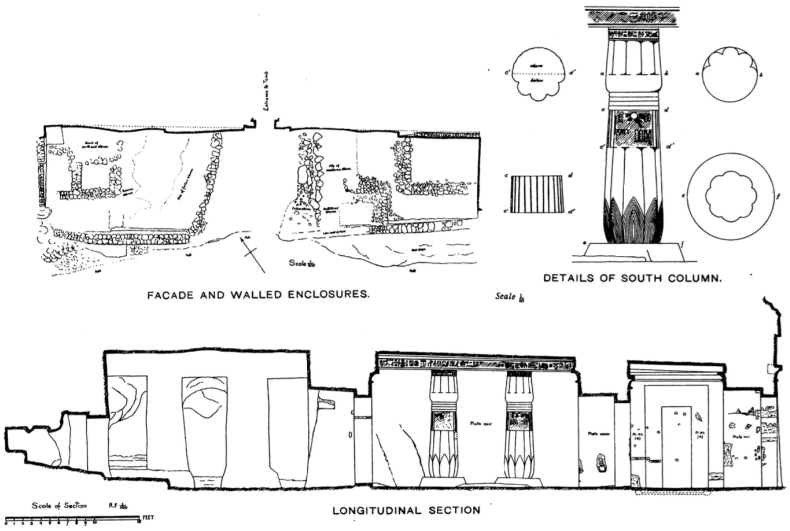


Figure 6. Details of Meryra's Tomb (04) (Davies, 1903, p. Plate II).

Relief Subjects

Reliefs begin at doorways, on a lintel, with the king and queen either side of an offering table under the Aten disc, with rays and hands extending towards them, and jamb with the Aten disc with rays and hands protecting the royal cartouches. The images themselves revolutionary in a canon that saw little change prior to this time, in their shocking exaggerated form and their familial representation, described as images that biologically would have provoked a significant and involuntary pre-motor cortextual response for the viewer *in space* (Arlette, 2021, p. 1). This forms the introduction to the fundamental metaphor of Amarna tomb art, the new triadic emblematic representation of the king and queen under the Aten communicates their beneficent relationship, political, material and spiritual omni-power. Lintels and jambs do not identify the deceased but with a calculated use of repetition, this initial emblem, the glorification of the Aten and Akhenaten's divine right to rule, is amplified throughout the tomb. Doors provide transitional points from *actual space* (external), *historical space* in the main chamber and the *funerary space* of the shrine, in the reliefs 'the political, public and private life of the deceased…bridge …the world of the living and the dead' (Meyers, 1985, p. 39) effectively creating another reality. This is a significant departure from traditional Egyptian tomb art, where

familiar funerary scenes, such as the deceased hunting, are laid out sequentially. Amarna tomb art appears '*intensely concerned with the expression of three-dimensional space*' (Meyers, 1985, pp. 39,51). Reliefs are not linear, their meaning is invoked from the narrative emblem throughout, with 'no isolated ways to perceive meaning…expressions are composites…allusion to one thematic structure' (Meyers, 1985, p. 40). Viewers are therefore *suspended* in a structural space, *surrounded* by emblematic reliefs, *directed* through the order in which the reliefs should be viewed and *transported* through to a re-emergence into the 'real' world.

In the main chamber the emblem of the political and social structure of Amarna is continued with all elements, the deceased, buildings, city plans, activities shown placed around the King. Reliefs here show less symbolic images and more literal elements of the king's ideological claim to rule, channelling the Aten, and political reality, linking the deceased official to the king. When these are combined with the structure of the tomb it is less a narrative and more an amalgamate of ideas, that span and interact with all spatial elements, not just those in their respective chambers. Meryra's main chamber in Tomb (04), as High Priest of the Aten in Akhetaten, Fan Bearer on the Right Hand of the King (Arp-Neumann, 2020, p. 22)), although still unfinished, is the most complete (Figs. 7, 8 & 9).

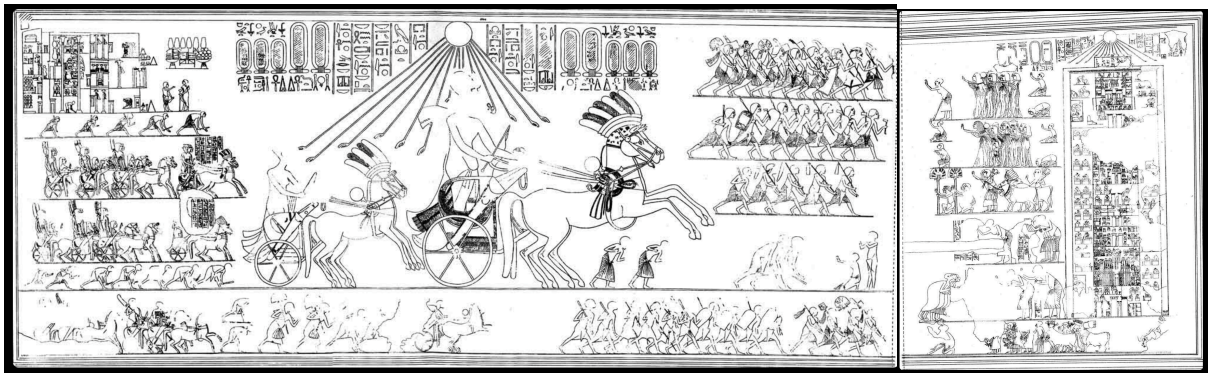


Figure 7. Main Chamber: Middle West Wall (left) and Back Wall from corner(right) (Davies, 1903, p. Plates X & Xa)

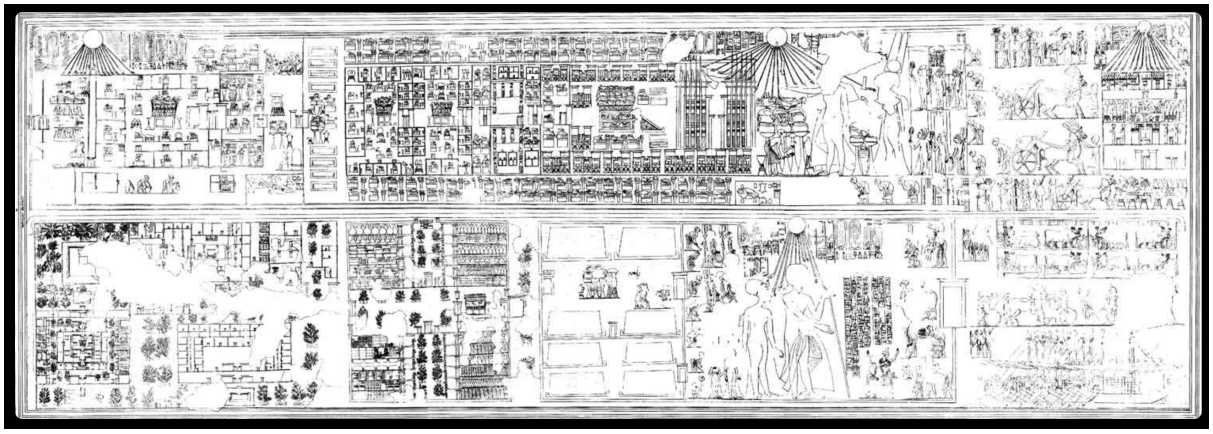


Figure 8. Main Chamber: Corner of East Wall (left) and East Part of the Back Wall from Corner (Davies, 1903, p. Plate XXV)

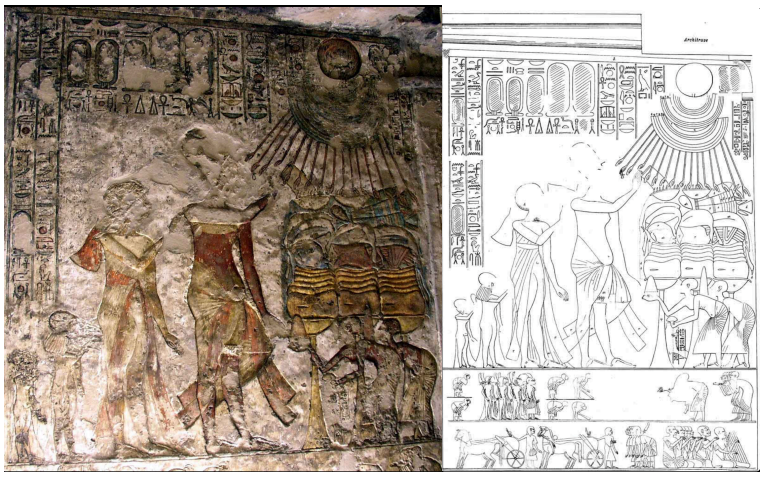


Figure 9. Main Chamber: East Part of the South Wall Upper Register (left) (Benderitter, 2004-2024), Right (Davies, 1903, p. Plate XXII)

Even designed and intended for the High Priest of the Aten, the emblematic assemblage is consistent, featuring Akhenaten and Nefertiti in chariots (Fig. 7) with a military escort, followed by the royal family, on their way to the Temple of the Aten, with Meryra a minor character waiting to greet them at the temple, the relief continuing around a corner and terminating at the entrance to the inner chamber. On the East and back walls, the royal couple prominently present offerings to the Aten; in another section they present Meryra with a gold collar (Fig. 8) the panel also extending around the corner. All reliefs showing Akhenaten's central role in mediating between the Aten and his subjects, thereby maintaining the social order. Meryra's presence however is only depicted in so far as they interact with the king.

Important to this exploration and related spatial research, and contrary to the idea that Egyptian tombs were usually sealed, it is generally accepted Amarna tombs were *open to visits* by the pre-deceased and family and friends, travelling along roads, the outlines of which are still evident today, confirmed by a votive stelae found in Tomb 23 belonging to Any (Meyers, 1985, pp. 41,42). There therefore appears to be a performative, psychological element to these constructions. Contemporaries visiting the tomb, pre and/or post death of the deceased, would be submerged in political and religious ideological representations of the King, the Aten and the lesser role of the deceased, always in relation to the king, within an environment that appears to have been designed *around the spectator*. While separate from the 'real' world of Akhetaten, the tomb's construction deliberately evokes and presents a space that clearly appears to carry that world in to and out of the tomb and, whilst inside, submerges the viewer in a world of Akhenaten's creation, mirroring the physical world being constructed in his new city but 'more'; an immersive virtual reality of his political and theological ideals in higher dimensional space.

The last separate element of the tomb is a small shrine, containing a niche containing the figure of the deceased, with relief panels typically showing the funeral, funerary equipment and furniture. Thus completing the progression from the political / ideological symbol externally, the king's central public presentation, with minor references to the deceased to the smallest most private shrine of the deceased, the familial relationships in the reliefs, with family members offering to the deceased, continuing to carry through to this most private of spaces the performative elements of the King and the Aten, echoing his declaration he is its son and enjoying a similar familial relationship with the omnipresent, life giving Aten.

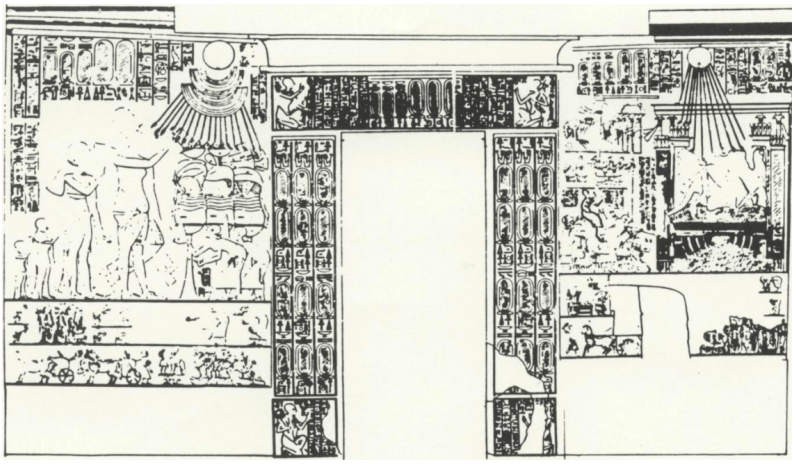


Figure 10. Meryra's Tomb (04) South Wall, East and West Panels, seen on exit from the Main Chamber (Meyers, 1985, p. 44).

On leaving the Tombs the visitor is often presented with scenes from the deceased's career. In Tomb 04, Meryra's investiture is represented, and they are seen assisting Akhenaten in making offerings to the Aten (Fig. 10). Still, on exiting the tomb, the viewer is therefore presented with the importance of the Aten, the king's relationship to it and the minor role the official plays in supporting that balanced ideology and therefore balance in the outside world order.

Texts

Texts play an important role in the spatial presentation of the Tombs and mirror the hierarchical relationships seen in the reliefs, continuing their 'thematic as well as directional focus' (Meyers, 1985, p. 45). The hymn to the Aten, always matched with a relief of the deceased at prayer, and burial petitions, are located at doorways, affirming the supremacy of the Aten and its choice to appoint the king its conduit, turning royal commands into divine instructions. The hymn appears to mirror the tomb structure, made of three parts, the introduction associated with the entrance, the main element, Day and Night and the Rising and Setting Sun, associated with the main chamber and the activities revolving around the King represented there, the conclusion linked with the shrine. The agential element making these transitions from public to private space in relief and text always the king.

Thirdspace

With Thirdspace, Edward Soja develops theories from Foucault (Foucault, 1986) and Lefebvre (Witrow, 2004, p. 25), to articulate a triadic, inclusive model of space; 'Firstspace' (the real) interacting with 'Secondspace' (the imagined or ideological engagement with that space) to produce something 'more' (Borch, 2002, p. 114), a 'fully lived' (Borch, 2002, p. 114) '*Third*space' (Soja, 2010, p. 363). It avoids the attitude of much historicist scholarship in which time takes precedence (Soja, 2010, p. 362) and space is seen as 'dead' (Foucault, 1980, p. 10); Soja's 'Great Ontological Distortion' (Soja, 2010, p. 362). Soja did not see space as inert (Soja, 2010, p. 362) but an active agent, *the* active agent in experience. Thirdspace theory arose from Soja's analysis of modern urban environments (Soja, 1989, 1996), and is little applied in ancient contexts, however, given the evident, intentional, spatial nature of the architecture and relief decoration of the tombs at Amarna, they appear well placed to undergo a Thirdspace analysis, indeed any analysis that honours and foregrounds, space. The viewer, in these tombs, a key component within what appears to have been actively designed as an entirely immersive experience; an idealised, virtual reality. A design to be experienced. The viewer and their view, carefully positioned, and directed as they approach, enter and interact with the spaces within the tomb itself. The experience of the space, set within a consistent design pattern, both architecturally and decoratively, not in a linear fashion but a space that truly is 'other', one in which the viewer, the tomb owner, the city itself and the divine triad of the King, Nefertiti and the Aten are conjoined and made real. The space a true heterotopia (Foucault, 1986). A reality reflecting the King's desires. An idealised experience of the viewers reality in the city itself, combined with the ideology of Akhenaten made 'real' and immersive through architectural attention focussing devices, a play on perspective, three dimensional reliefs, high colour and texts. A subterranean space in which Akhenaten's new city and ideology could truly take shape and be made 'real'. Thirdspace per se is the real and the imagined

coming together to create an 'other', the truly experienced space. In this respect Thirdspace has merit as a tool to breakthrough Cartesian distinctions in the modern mind about what is 'real' and what is 'imagined'. To a modern mind these are two distinct states, the real is not the imagined and the imagined is not real, however, in the deliberate, genius design of the Amarna tomb, even that dedicated to the Aten's Chief Priest, Meryra, when space is foregrounded, one can clearly see the real and imagined come together to present an 'other', a space in which the real and imagined merge and present a world that is neither but one that Akhenaten needed to exist, *to be experienced*, in order to realise the success of Akhetaten and his rule. At the outset of this exploration I considered Thirdspace would likely prove useful in considering the lived experience of Amarna Tombs and believe for the reasons stated this continues to have merit, with these spaces rightly considered 'other', however in further considering its applicability to access lived experience there are limitations, one being its prima facie requirement to accept the terms 'real' and 'imagined'. In an ancient context these two states are highly unlikely to be distinguished in the way we consider them today and even so, if one begins to consider the metaphysical questions this raises I agree with another spatial philosopher, publishing in the same year as Soja, Edward Casey, that one can become embroiled in a 'deconstructive meltdown' (Casey, 1996, p. 36) when considering distinguishing what is 'real' and what is 'imagined', itself suggestive of an 'inner and outer world' also rejected by a third spatialist, Ingold (Ingold, 1993, p. 154). Casey agrees with Soja that 'space' or 'place' should not be seen as inert but, building on Archytas and Aristotle, states 'place is prior to space'. Casey's theories of 'emplacement' (Casey, 1996, p. 36) which does not rely on such distinctions may be equally revealing experientially (Casey, 1996, p. 16) and, supported by post-modernists Bachelard and Heidegger, he proposes 'place is the first of all things' (Casey, 1996, p. 16) with much emphasis on accessing experience through the 'lived body' and the sense of 'being in a place' (Casey, 1996, p. 17) itself worthy of further research in relation to reaching further toward an understanding of the lived experience of these tombs.

Reflections

Although Amarna, a short period in ancient Egypt spanning from the Palaeolithic (c.700,000 BCE) to the Roman Period (395 CE) (Shaw, 2000, pp. ix-x), is one of the most studied in Ancient Egyptian scholarship, it remains 'difficult to bring…the lived experience of Atenism into focus' (Hill, 2014). Study of the period usually attempts to bring together different 'stories' (Kemp, 2013, p. 18), that of Akhenaten, his family and what Kemp describes simply as his 'ideas' (Kemp, 2013, p. 18), Akhenaten's eccentricity and devotion to being a 'builder-king [whose] major occupation was self-expression through architecture and landscape' (Kemp, 2013, p. 18), the talented but radical artist and poet, distilling and conflating with himself, and his wife Nefertiti, with the power of the sun, in what appear to be state sanctioned exaggerated artistic representations, alongside his authorship of the 'Hymn to the Aten' (Kemp, 2013, p. 18). These Kempian 'stories' are then often interwoven with the city 'story' of Akhetaten in the shadow of the Wadi cleft, within which the sun rose, beginning its journey across the sky; an image and journey directly informing its urban plan and the anticipated rhythm of elite and non-elite city life (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Simulated views of the rising sun in the cleft of the Wadi from the raised platform behind the first pylons of the Great Aten Temple and the source architectural detail appearing in Meryra's tomb (Kemp & Docherty, 2017-2018, pp. 2,5,7).

The spatial philosopher Foucault might describe these stories as 'skeins' (Foucault, 1986, p. 22) in space and '*less of a… life developing through time, than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein"* (Foucault, 1986, p. 22) and foregrounding space in an analysis of the

tombs at Amarna affords an interesting research opportunity to bring together these ‘skeins’ to further explore the thin slice of space (and time) Akhenaten occupied.

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Hieroglyphs:

 Meryra (Davies, 1903, p. 7)

 Akhetaten (Meyers, 1985, p. 35)

 Aten (Meyers, 1985, p. 35)

 Amun (Meyers, 1985, p. 35)