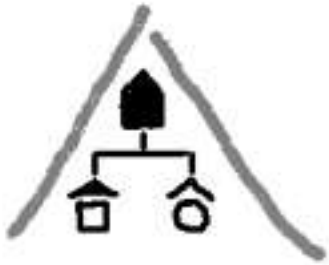
Man is the measure of all things,

of the existence of the things that are

and the non-existence of the things that are not

(Protagoras, 481-411 BC, quoted in Platon´s Theaitetos)



Abstract

In my dissertation project I contemplate architecture under anthropological perspectives in a world of rapid cultural transformation. I focus on the increasing demand to design for different cultural environments and the considerations necessary to meet these requirements. In this context I will introduce new approaches and guidelines that anthropology and cultural studies can supply to the design process.

Our world is changing ever faster and in the last decades the term "globalization" has entered almost every contemporary debate in a variety of fields. Although present in some form in earlier phases of history, globalization in current discussion has gained a considerably different meaning. Rapidly increasing worldwide interaction through phenomena such as the media, migration or tourism forces almost every discipline and profession to reconsider and to react. Dealing with an ever more interdependent world urges us to finally integrate developing countries into global considerations, stopping the long lasting construction of Western elites leaving important developing tasks out on the margins. This requires new thinking in broader terms – also in the discipline of architecture.

Contemporary architects have to face a world without certainties to base their work on. They are left in a terrain that is unknown to them and the results of their designs are as unsound as their orientation in a culturally unknown landscape. Long established design guidelines such as locality, place, climate and available building materials have to be reconsidered and placed into a wider context. So far the only reaction has been a worldwide confusion and the escape into an explosive variety of -isms and stiles. I suggest that there is only one certainty left in architecture nowadays: Architecture is designed for the people who live in it, work in it, and are represented through it. But who are these people who suddenly do not act in a particular place anymore, whose cultural heritage loosens and whose horizons are influenced by images from the other side of the world? How does an architect deal with the demanding task to build for cultures s/he is not familiar with and new „transformed cultures“ that haven’t even existed before?

Culture has never been static. It has always been a process of adaptation that happened throughout the evolution of mankind. It only changes faster now, more dramatic and under more pressured circumstances that don’t leave time for “adaptation” but can

only be referred to as “transformation”. Architecture is a major tool to express culture, identity and the ideology of people. Architecture is a physical statement of anthropology. And it is the field of anthropology that has put more effort into cultural studies and the overall understanding of the human being than any other discipline. Throughout its existence, anthropology has developed research methodologies that have found useful application in a variety of subjects. Also architecture is too important to leave it to architects alone. Anthropological methodology can provide a most helpful tool to the architect, particularly in tracing the major wants and needs of the people the design is based on - and anthropology can thus provide a central theme to hold on to, no matter what style and expression the architect chooses.

Throughout a theoretical cross-cultural-study I point out in a holistic approach that failures and successes of building projects are strongly interwoven with anthropological issues. Based on this insight I worked out a scheme for an "anthropological pre-design study" (APD-Study) which is destined to be implemented especially in regions where a cultural approach is hard to capture, and which should be implemented prior to the start of a major building project.

Ladakh is one significant example representative for various regions, where recent developments have revolutionized the existing political, economic, social and spiritual structure of society – and therefore also the process of building. I argue that in developing regions planning strategies still put an overemphasis on the utilitarian dimension, namely, on economic and technological advances, whereas it is overdue to put fresh emphasis on the cultural, aesthetic and spiritual dimension to gain basic acceptance among the people. There will never be a customs control on the transfer of ideas and ideals. But more important than idealized superior visions is the strong need to trace the actual requirements and the needs of the people in the growing complexity of societies. Architects and planners need to go back to the people as the focal point of all activities. However, this is a dimension which is much harder to capture than technical certainties, and the simple ”add-culture-and-stir”-approach has caused more trouble than good. The truth is that there is clearly a lack of theoretical precision and methodological consideration in the search for human demands on housing.

In the following chapters I will illustrate that the field of anthropology, which has long defined the human being and culture as the cornerstones of its subject, is the discipline that can provide the architect and planner with the necessary methodological toolkit to

survive in the complexity of this task. Highlighting this point through the example of Ladakh, I will demonstrate that with the help of anthropology it is possible to develop a scientific way to trace the manifold wants and needs people may have regarding their housing situation. The ambitious task to approach both disciplines, anthropology and architecture, imposes constraints as well as obligations. First of all it has to find a vocabulary which is available to all, and above this the work should address academics and practitioners alike. A common conceptual framework of the two disciplines is clearly important in order to gain more satisfactory results regarding the building process in developing countries.

A new phenomenon to deal with is the enormous speed of the current transformation process which creates unknown problems in all spheres of life, housing being one of them. While formerly the question was: “What is the attitude towards the built environment in this or that culture?” It now has to be: “How is the attitude towards the built environment changing in this culture due to increasing transnational interaction?” Although theoretically a mutual process, the unilateral character of this interaction – or intervention - in many less-informed countries is best expressed by the use of the term ”westernization”, which signifies the mechanical imitation of a particular way of life, as a synonym for ”modernization”. The creation of new needs is a fundamental requirement for reformation, social change, intellectual shift and alike and thus it is a phenomenon which – to state it in a simplified version - promotes both materialism and individualism. Along with this comes a transformation of attitudes towards the house. Because of the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization, architecture also has gained a new meaning as a symbol of identification. However – there is a thin line between the mere copying of the Western approach and the potential for a creative transformation that could highly enrich the architectural landscape.

How should a planner and builder react to all these new expectations in architecture? Trying to trace the real wants and needs is not an easy task, since one will soon find out that there is considerable discrepancy in what people think, what they say and what the real issues are. It is not enough to find out what people want, but to understand, why they want it. During a two-month field research in Ladakh, I conducted an ”anthropological pre-design study” (APD-study) prior to a major housing project called ”Solar Town”. The purpose of my study, which I conducted in one of the already existing housing colonies around the capital Leh, was to gain a profound grasp of the people’s

views regarding their housing situation, actual as well as ideal, and - based on that - to suggest planning guidelines for the new project.

There is no global truth in how to approach the difficult task of dealing with the human being in its cultural, social, spiritual and ideological context. However, it is important to strongly enforce the attention paid to this matter in order to gain more adequate and sustainable planning results for building projects – for this seems certain: The amount of time invested is insignificant in comparison with the severe mistakes that can be prevented.

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