

Built Environments and the Anthropology of Space

GARY W. McDONOGH

Abstract

Analysis of human interaction with and interpretations of the surrounding physical world has been of fundamental interest for anthropology since its emergence as a discipline in the nineteenth century. The comparative description of homes, monumental spaces, and worked landscapes has provided foundations for social and cultural analysis and facilitated early exchanges with archaeology, architecture history, and linguistics. Over time, changes in the lives of those with whom anthropologists work and the concomitant expansion of urban anthropologies have promoted new questions as well as expanding interactions with geography, social theory, urban studies and gender, class, ethnic, and cultural studies while engaging anthropologists in wider public participation. Future anthropologies of space and place should continue to build on these methodological, data and theoretical heritages, including fieldwork and global comparisons, while expanding interdisciplinarity and engaging civic perspectives. Building on these foundations, anthropologists will need to address environmental concerns in their broadest scope. They will also grapple with the methodological and theoretical challenges of changing mobilities and similarly analyze rapidly evolving (electronic) mediations and virtual spaces and communities while sharing this knowledge in wider academic and public discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Description and analysis of human adaptations and impacts across diverse environments has permeated socio-cultural anthropology since its nineteenth-century origins. Depictions of indigenous dwellings and settlements and their multilayered meanings, the comparative reconstruction of early monuments and their connections and the theoretical questions of place, gender, race class, and power that became dominant with “the spatial turn” in cultural anthropology in the 1990s have made knowledge of the built environment fundamental. Today, continuing issues of interdisciplinary dialogue, socio-cultural methods, comparison and engagement with/reflection on power frame potential futures, where

expanding examinations of humans and their environments, relations of movement and connections and the role of mediated imaginations will shape changing meanings of place. These trends should continue to build on existing documentation, analyses, and comparisons while moving into wider exchanges.

FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

Classic anthropological monographs analyzed questions about places and meanings for readers far from fieldwork settings. Concerns with structures, physical and social, pervade the British structural anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, the theoretical models of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss and the careful documentation of Native Americans by Franz Boas and his students in the United States. Despite differences in culture and power between anthropologists and their “subjects,” critical voices, including indigenous anthropologists as varied as Jomo Kenyatta and Zora Neale Hurston, challenged early on many simplistic spaces of domination. Global changes after World War II brought anthropology into the cities and cultures from which most scholars themselves had emerged. Anthropologists, too, engaged the energies of once-dominated peoples seeking change. These developments expanded issues for anthropology of space and place, especially in terms of global urbanization, from shanty-towns to immigrant enclaves. Critical self-reflection in the 1960s and 1970s, when anthropology boomed as a source of knowledge about cultural alternatives, raised questions of ethics and responsibilities abroad. Since the 1980s, anthropologists have faced multiple challenges of speaking for and with global peoples, as immersive fieldwork has become restricted by funds, limitations of access, and employment markets in both academic/research domains and positions through which anthropologists apply their knowledge to policies, education, health care, and other social realms. General political economic concerns of voice, power and, action and specific questions of how and when one may work as an anthropologist shape issues for the future as well as differentiating discourses worldwide.¹

In 1990, Denise Lawrence and Setha Low reviewed histories and current work in anthropologies of space and the built environment for the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1990). They showed how classic documentation and interpretations of place across global societies had been renewed by connections with psychology, social theory, and political economics, creating a wide,

1. North American anthropologists have begun to deal with environment degradation, cultural differences, mass media, and urban and suburban forms while Spanish colleagues often favor work on public spaces/movements that resonates with democratic transformations since the 1970s. Chinese studies, meanwhile, look at urbanization, housing, and technologies that embody the development of a new China.

fluid field with varied descriptive tools seeking to deal with ever stronger social issues, especially the nexus of space and power. A decade later, the authors updated their survey, underscoring continuities in studies of embodied and gendered spaces while stressing the impact of political economics, geography and social theorists including Pierre Bourdieu, Manuel Castells, and David Harvey as the study of the built environment moved beyond construction and meaning toward understanding struggles over control and identity (2003).

The interdisciplinarity characterizing anthropologies of the built environment began with awareness of archaeological explorations and reconstruction of past place as well as linguistics (in the languages of space). Early anthropologists also reached out to history, architecture, and art as corollary disciplines of vision and form. Over time, interdisciplinarity has entailed wider dialogues with geography, psychology, landscape and planning, and cultural, ethnic, class, and gender studies.

In such dialogues, anthropologists share data, methods and theory. Ethnographic investigations, often based on long-term fieldwork, incorporate a wide range of voices and interpretations, manifesting cultural diversity. Concerns with structure and process and the integration of social life, politics, economics, and material culture foster holistic understandings of human places. Both field experience and theoretical models underpin central commitments to listen and explore layers of lived meanings that enrich anthropological intersections with environmental sciences or urban policies.

Anthropologists generally situate differences of construction, use, and experience of place within comparative frameworks. Nineteenth-century studies often framed homes, temples, and fields in so-called "primitive" societies through evolutionary models. Over time, systematic analyses of place and process took over, replacing pseudo-temporal sequences with questions of contact, shared heritage and parallel social processes that embedded meanings in village walls, women's domestic spaces, and monumental constructions. Modern studies often look at dynamic cities, moving populations, and multiple settings, yet comparing global cases still provides insights in practice and theory.

A final issue arises from the multiple roles of anthropologists as scholar/citizens who question familiar places (home, office, church, school) as cultural products and critique implications of unequal relations described through "neocolonialism," "modernization," "development," or "neoliberalism." Anthropologists further address differences within "home" settings that reveal underlying issues of social injustice and cultural debate. While commitments vary, anthropologists remain profoundly shaped by the societies within which they have become immersed in research and those

for whom they write, teach, and consult (and the intersections among these global public spheres).

Such foundations shape trajectories for future developments. Yet, we must recognize the continuities of anthropological research as scholars themselves and new generations of students return to the “same” places and peoples with new eyes. Those who inhabit these spaces with their ideas, issues and bodies also alter their presents, futures, and pasts—and call on anthropologists to explain, defend or help preserve place and meaning. The reexamination of houses, properties, or techniques documented in the past participates in struggles to save history and link traditions and futures in the face of globalization and conflicts. These forces, too, will shape the future anthropology of the built environment.

CUTTING EDGE/FUTURE ISSUES

ENVIRONMENT

Amid global warming, shrinking resources, and struggles over water, space, food and, clean air, anthropologists face environmental issues daily in their lives, teaching, and research. The human construction of nature—perception, ownership, techniques of exploitation, enhancement, and damage—underpins human ecological models that have examined relations of the built environment and forms of production, from hunter-gatherers through domestications to complex irrigated, imperial, industrial, and post-industrial societies. Nonetheless, the twenty-first century has seen more intense awareness of environmental issues and new connections with life and physical sciences as well as changing ecological concerns from architecture to planning to politics. The sheer interdisciplinarity of environmental studies challenges methods, expertise, and theories: what do anthropologists bring to contemporary discussions, policies, and activism?

Water studies illustrate future possibilities for many other topics. Anthropologists of space and place have looked at how societies use and distribute water, including nourishment, cleansing, agricultural use, landscaping and ornamentation, and transportation. Today, human-created shortages, struggles for control amid global economic interests, and social justice have become urgent hydrological issues while anthropologists become witnesses for existing rights of place in conflictive situations, where indigenous societies meet multinational claims. The very question of metropolitan flows embodies layers of social meanings, control, and exclusion as Eric Swyngedouw has shown in his powerful analysis of the water system of Guayaquil, Ecuador (2004). Privatization of water sparks debates in Europe

and North America, while just provision of safe water remains a major concern across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Thus, in a 2010 virtual edition of *Cultural Anthropology*, Stuart McLean concluded, "I would see a more sustained engagement with water and offering far-reaching possibilities for transforming both the terms in which we describe reality and our sense of what counts as reality" (<http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/226>).

While energy seems more distant from space and place, old and new resources have important consequences for the built environment and beyond, as argued monthly in the 2011 *Anthropology Newsletter*. On a global scale, anthropologists have begun to study issues ranging from the implications of the growth and decline of societies based on cheap fossil fuels to the consequences of alternative fuels, whether nuclear energy or water, sun, and wind power. All these elements shape the way people live at fundamental levels of heat, light, and power. Settlement patterns, whether suburban sprawl, urban densification, or far-flung enclaves, must be reread through energy costs. The fading hegemony of oil entails reexamination of the global built environment: filling stations, road systems, and even plastics as an intrinsic, almost unavoidable component of "modernity." As citizens and scholars realize that energy can never be taken for granted, anthropologists face calls for input on planning, policy and equity as well as wider visions of the future of energy, form, and society. This demands comparative analyses of social forms of capture, distribution, exploitation, and ownership of different forms of energy, themes Middle-Eastern historian Timothy Mitchell raises in his *Carbon Democracy*, comparing democracies in coal and oil states (2011).

Other energies raise similar questions. Andrew Brooks' 2012 review of public anthropologists and nuclear power highlights issues including disaster planning and linguists' efforts to devise a universal code through which to identify storage areas for nuclear waste. In many studies, the construction of the environment seems subordinated to energy itself. Brooks, however, cites Sumihara (2003) on the presentation of nuclear energy in welcome centers and the shift, in Japan, from technological display to reassurance directed at young mothers.

While examining humans in the environment, the holistic, comparative vantages of anthropology and the field's connections to different discourses within and across societies provide useful counterpoints to public policies and social movements framed in ideological terms. "Sustainable housing," "green cities," "public" parks, cemeteries and stadia are all sites of materials, energy and social formation that may take on mythic dimensions of "green-washing." That is, public claims about environmental values eclipse other processes, for example, the construction of "green" luxury apartments in

contrast to the needs of the homeless. Here, an engaged future anthropology should have impacts beyond journals and classrooms.

MOBILITY AND FLOWS

Classic paradigms of fieldwork put anthropologists themselves into motion to report on distant, stable populations, even if “stability” entailed large-scale pastoral migrations or the perilous sea voyages Malinowski charted in the Kula ring of the Trobriands (1922). Later, recognition of the flows of people, goods and ideas around the world fostered transnational readings and multi-site ethnographies that challenged decades of anthropology on foot. As Sheller and Urry (2006) show, mobilities that transform space and time demand analysis. How do we understand people and bodies in motion, whether bicyclists, subway riders, drivers on highways or jet passengers? And what are the spatial ramifications of movements? Changing perceptions of landscape, burgeoning supplies of goods and emporia to display them, magnificent terminals as symbolic gateways and questions of access, and experience push paradigms of speed and scale beyond foot, canoes or horseback. Moreover, choices and movements intersect with concrete systems, from streets to the seeming placelessness of air travel.

Anthropology has evolved in an automotive age, experiencing developments in metropolitan areas and transformation of traditional field areas, leading to a growing bibliography on automobility across cultures (Featherstone, 2004). Still, anthropologists must also speak with architects and architectural historians, planners and others to trace complex transformation of houses and connectors among settlements (suburbs, rural areas, squatter towns), linking mobility to energy and to power relations favoring private or public connections, which shaped possibilities of mass construction, density and social spaces.

Mobility studies must balance the station and the trip. The methodological and analytic challenges here have been highlighted by Chandra Bhimull (2007), who reviews how anthropologists have dealt with the built environment of the air, from scrutiny of airports to understanding stewardesses, as prelude to her analysis of airlines and empire through the role of Imperial Airways in the Caribbean from the 1920s onwards. Recent popular texts, meanwhile, have envisioned airports as “aerotropoles” for urbanists and politicians (Kasarda & Lindsay, 2011), making it important to grapple with both multiple functions and the nature of place and communities established there as well as global linkages.

In short, studies of people in motion do not destroy ideas of place and built environment but demand creative positioning and perspectives encompassing movement and connection, speed and rest. Through these studies,

anthropologists should illuminate variable interpretations reflecting multiple parameters of inclusion and exclusion: class, gender, race, age, ability, and other social divisions are confronted (and hidden) in travel, whether buying a ticket or debating the privacy of airport scanners. Critical comparative analyses reveal further variations in structures and outcomes and allow anthropologists to comment on relations of power and mobility for other future citizens.

MEDIA AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

The speed and motion that liquefy built environments evoke the media by which we understand it. Direct experience of concrete place constitutes only part of a web of meaning mediated through stories, memories, images, and visions. The stuff of telling, as of movement, has been revolutionized by the electronic transmission of data worldwide and these media demand innovative understandings of place, connections, and virtual environments.

Despite the formation of the discipline as way of telling stories, older anthropologists moved slowly to grasp mass medias (despite sometimes productive engagements with film and photography as tools). Linkages between mass media studies and the built environment have tended to stress content. Nonetheless, crucial questions of production, distribution, and reception already underpin Brian Larkin's studies of cinematic worlds in Nigeria and other essays in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Ginzburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002).

The digital revolution poses further questions. One need only consider the cell phone, which has made obsolescent a whole series of spaces devoted to phones (booths, central switchboards) and has altered the "place" of speech in public. Rapid changes have had an impact where cell-phone technologies leapfrogged over earlier infrastructural deficits. Rapid data flows, shared photographs, and texting further revise questions of distance, privacy, and boundaries of communication, including those of the nation-state. Meanwhile, urban immigrant businesses "handling" communication and transmission of money to dispersed homes remind us that mediated communication sustains inequality, too.

Other compelling issues face anthropology *vis-à-vis* communicative universes formed online. These include fundamental challenges to methods—what is the presence of the anthropologist? What are the ethical dimensions of listening and sharing online? Different patterns and records of communication raise questions about community and place. Has an internet world replaced, in part, physical spaces like libraries, cinemas, or classrooms? What constitutes structure and meaning among the avatars of chat rooms, blogs, or listservs? When mythic game worlds adopt "regular" places, currencies,

battles, and powers, how do we analyze them? Or relate them to other physical social worlds with which they coexist, ranging from isolated bedrooms to gaming centers providing havens for immigrant youths to escapes from office life?

Can virtual spaces replace fundamental places of social life? Not, perhaps homes, beds, or parks (despite how media help reimagine such places). But what about spaces of religion, as spiritual forms and practices emerge based entirely on the worldwide web? To what extent are places of worship, sites of pilgrimage, spaces of advising, or gatherings of shared transcendent experience part of online worlds? What demands and possibilities do these creations open for anthropology of space and place? While the examination of ritual places represents a significant heritage, this shift in the nature of place has provoked provocative new debates (<http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu/blog/mon-05142012-1132/scholar%E2%80%99s-top-5-christopher-helland-online-religion-and-religion-online>). Changing media—old and new—demand discussions about the very meaning of place, public spheres, and privacy, relying on past knowledge but imbued by experimentation shared, perhaps more equally than in the past, by anthropologists and informants.

CONCLUSIONS

These areas of emergent work in the study of the form, meanings and conflict scarcely exhaust futures for the field. Growing concerns with sensorial and corporeal anthropologies and the role of sound, smell, and touch, for example, challenge the adequacy of past interpretations (Hirshkind, 2006). Questions from other fields of anthropology—medical studies, archaeology, economics, agriculture—will continue to pose questions of space and society. And new questions, will emerge from the shared experiences of humans in changing environments—for example, *where* is security in a world of global terror (Guano, 2013)? The value of future studies of space and place, nonetheless, demands understanding both of the past and of the civic matrices of an engaged discipline.

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GARY W. McDONOGH SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Gary W. McDonogh is Helen Herrmann Chair and Professor in the Department of Growth and Structure of Cities at Bryn Mawr College. An anthropologist concerned with issues of culture, conflict, and representation in world cities, he has worked for four decades in Barcelona, Spain, publishing *Good Families of Barcelona: A Social History of Power* (1986, Spanish Edition 1992) among other books and articles on that city. (e.g., *Iberian Worlds*, 2008). Returning to American studies, he published *Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia* (1992) and brought to light the long-archived WPA manuscript of *The Florida Negro* (1992); he also coedited the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Culture* (2001). His theoretical work on space and place includes the coedited *Cultural Meanings of Urban Place* (1992) and the recent coedited *Global Downtowns* (2012). In the twenty-first century, he has focused on collaborative work on place and mediation in global Chinatowns, working in Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Europe. This work includes his 2005 study

Global Hong Kong (coauthored with his wife, Professor of media culture Cindy Wong) and his coauthored "Beside Downtown: Global Chinatowns" (with Cindy Wong) in *Global Downtowns*. He is now coediting a collection on Global Sustainability that will be published by Cambridge in 2014.

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