

THE OPEN

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Abstract.

Recently there has been a renewed interest in Karl Popper's *The Open Society*, written during the Second World War in Christchurch. Popper also wrote another major book *The Poverty of Historicism*, which has been much debated.

The history of architecture revolves around the notion of closure. It is concerned with shelter, protection and differentiation. A history of openness in architecture has yet to be written. It does not see origins in the forest or the primitive hut but instead in the ocean and the boat. Open architecture is not concerned with closed rooms courtyards or squares. It is instead about platforms, decks, terraces, and beaches.

However in the period of global expansion, the extent of oceanic and continental geography provoked confrontation with the phenomenon of the open. Hodges, the artist on Cook's first voyage, continued to be confounded by the aesthetic appeal of Pacific and Asian architecture which couldn't be explained by reference to the architectural canon of ancient Greece. Oceanic societies lived in a way that contradicted traditional European architecture. In the extreme case aboriginal architecture was seen as non-existent.

This architecture of the new world introduced the notion of the open and provoked

the introduction of the modern. The skyscraper, the suburb, the freeway are new world examples of open architecture. The negatives of openness are well known; the boredom of suburbs the waste of the freeway and the banality of the skyscraper city. However the outcomes are sometimes sublime.

The architecture of openness endlessly strives for porosity, connection, or view, rather than enclosure, shelter, or containment. The positive story to be written is about the achievement of openness.

OCEANIA

At the time of European global exploration and colonial expansion Oceanic geography provoked confrontation with the phenomenon of the open. Hodges, the artist on Cook's first voyage, continued to be confounded by the appeal of Oceanic and Asian architecture which couldn't be explained by reference to the European tradition of buildings derived from the architectural canon of ancient Greece.¹ In Australia aboriginal architecture was not even seen. This other architecture of the new world introduced the notion of the open, and Bernard Smith has suggested, provoked the beginnings of the modern.² Pacific societies lived in a way that contradicted traditional European norms. But it needs to be

said that often gestures were misinterpreted as open but were in fact the opposite, the classic example being the Polynesian baring of genitals, an act that was taken as an invitation but was used as an extreme insult.³

An example of open architecture is in Samoa where the fale are not enclosed. The extraordinary openness of the fale can still be experienced and there are all sorts of sanctions against closure. The fale has (pola) around the perimeter but these are used as wind protection rather than for privacy. “Even when there is a storm, Samoans have told me that some of the blinds – at least one- should always remain up because if all of them are lowered ‘it becomes very dangerous’”.⁴ The fale is like an island, the edge mimicking the permeability of the beachfront, as a zone of encounter. This permeability was remarked upon by Margaret Mead. who in a letter justifying her decision to not live in a fale spoke about “[t]he nerve wrecking conditions of living with half a dozen people in the same room in a house without walls always sitting on the floor and sleeping in the constant expectation of having a pig or a chicken wish itself upon ones notice”⁵

The fale is unicellular and unconnected to other unicellular buildings as is the situation throughout Oceania. The va the open space between the buildings, makes the village in some respects polycentred. However the village is also organised around the malae. The malae of Samoa derives from (or is possibly the source of) the marae of East Polynesia, which as raised stone platforms and an extreme case of open architecture. These platforms as an evocation of openness are oriented towards the open forms of the ocean or the mountain. They are clearings in dense bush and the construction of level platforms.

Oceania is characterized by openness. This reached its culmination in the extraordinary openness of Rapanui (Easter Island) where the whole island was opened up and cleared.

The New Zealand marae derives from those of East Polynesia and is the open space in front of the meeting house. Marae means open and the ocean is referred to as marae roa the big openness. By contrast the Maori whare is a building characterised by being almost completely closed. But as with all Oceanic buildings interior partitions are not tolerated within – the interior space is unicellular and resolutely open.

OPEN AND CLOSED

The example of the whare draws attention to the nature of the open. Even the openness of the sea is closed by the horizon –. Outer space is the ultimate open and is impossible for most of us of to imagine as an ever expanding universe. Instead our understanding of space is structured by the forms of the stars and planets. Scully speaking of Greek Temples says: “They in fact functioned and, in their fragments, still function as no buildings before or since have done. They not only created an exterior environment – which is one of architecture’s primary function to do - that was wider, free, and more complete than architectures have encompassed.”⁶

The Greek temple is a closed form with a porous exterior and it might be said that all architecture operates with both open and closed. There cannot be an open architecture without closed forms. Openness is a condition relative to the closed, while opening is a movement from closure, and dependent upon it.

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown might be claimed to be the first to argue for open architecture in *Learning from Las Vegas*.⁷ They state that “architects have been brought up on space, and enclosed space is the easiest to handle.”⁸ Presumably openness is much more complicated. Venturi and Scott Brown describe how architects have been ‘bewitched’ by the Piazza which is of course also closed space.⁹ They proposed that having discovered the Piazza in the nineteen forties that “architects are perhaps ready for similar lessons about large open space, big scale, and high speed.”¹⁰ However open architecture as promoted by the Venturis remains an inaccessible dream.

There is a question as to whether there is any necessary connection between the open society and open architecture? At a crude level it might be said that closed societies are characterised by walls whereas open societies are characterised by highways, but there appears no necessary connection between an open society and open architecture.

¹ William Hodges,, *Travels in India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 and 1783*, (London: J. Edwards), 1793.

² Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985),

³ Anne Salmond, *Aphrodite’s Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti*, Auckland. Penguin), 2009, 51.

⁴ Serge Techerkezoff, “First Contacts in Polynesia: The Samoan Case (1722-1848),” (Canberra: ANU EPress, 2004), 42 -43.

⁵ Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 99.

⁶ Vincent Scully, *The Earth, The Temple and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979).

⁷ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steve Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas The forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1977).

⁸ Venturi et al, (1977), 7.

⁹ Venturi et al, (1977), 7.

¹⁰ Venturi et al, (1977), 18.