

OPEN ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract.

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.

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

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. Nevertheless 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 as a means of understanding the architecture of the Pacific Islands

THE OPEN SOCIETY

Recently there has been a renewed interest in Karl Popper's *The Open Society*,¹ written during the Second World War in Christchurch. Popper doesn't refer to New Zealand but he does mention Maori as an example of a closed society. "The early Greek tribal society resembles in many respects that of people like the Polynesians, the Maoris for instance."²

In these discussions the nature of the physical form of the city is assumed, and behind this paper is the issue of the open related to architecture. One question is whether the open in architecture relates to Popper's 'open society', which in turn is part of the bigger question of the relation of architecture to social formations which has plagued history and theory in architecture for so long.

OPEN ARCHITECTURE

A history of openness in architecture has yet to be written. This does not see origins in the forest, or the primitive hut, but instead in the ocean and the boat. For some, architecture is concerned with shelter and protection and it could be said that the history of architecture revolves around the notion of closure. Peter Sloterdijk claims that every architectural act "is an act of sphere formation, that is to say the creation of an interior."³ Open architecture on the other hand is not concerned with closed rooms, courtyards or squares. It is instead about platforms, decks, terraces, and beaches. The architecture of openness endlessly strives for porosity, connection, or view, rather than enclosure, shelter, or containment. The skyscraper, the suburb, the freeway are all new world examples of open architecture, while the open road figures in American life and myth as a dominant architectural form. The negatives of the open are well known; the boredom of suburbs the waste of the freeway and the banality of the high rise city, but the outcomes were sometimes sublime and are the locations of contemporary society. The positive story has yet to be written about the achievements of openness, transparency and hope.

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown might be claimed to be the first to argue for open architecture in their book *Learning from Las Vegas*.⁴ They state that “architects have been brought up on space, and enclosed space is the easiest to handle.”⁵ Presumably openness is much more complicated. Venturi and Scott Brown criticised the spatial preoccupations of architects and their disinterest with surface. They compare Las Vegas to Rome by analysing the use of open space in both cases. Although they have been seen as heralding postmodernism in architecture they describe the modernist forms of the cloverleaf and the airport as examples of open architecture and indeed modernism can be argued to be a move to the open, with the free plan and the substitution of the street for the highway.

Venturi and Scott Brown describe how architects have been ‘bewitched’ by the open space of the Piazza - which is of course also closed space.⁶ 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.”⁷ However open architecture as promoted by the Venturis remains an inaccessible dream.

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 architecture which couldn’t be explained by reference to the European tradition of buildings derived from the architectural canon of ancient Greece.⁸ 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, that it provoked the beginnings of the modern.⁹ Pacific societies lived in a way that contradicted traditional European norms. 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 actually an extreme insult.¹⁰

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 cultural sanctions against closure. The fale has coconut blinds (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'".¹¹ 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"¹²

The fale is unicellular and unconnected to other unicellular buildings as is the situation throughout Oceania. The open space between the buildings is known as the *va*. That is to say there is open space between the buildings, making the village in some respects polycentred. However the whole village is organised around the malae. The malae of Samoa derives from (or is possibly the source of) the marae of East Polynesia, which are raised stone platforms and the 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 often clearings in dense bush and are the construction of level platforms. Oceania is characterized by the empty space of the marae. 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. The openness of the marae is endlessly reinforced by the activities that take place on it. 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 to imagine in an ever-expanding universe. Instead our understanding of space is structured by the forms of the stars and planets. There is always open and closed. 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.”¹³

The origin of Greek architecture is argued to be the primitive timber hut a story with a long history with Oceanic architecture as a variation - the grass hut. However it is suggested here that this architecture is of a different order best understood by its overriding characteristic of openness.

¹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, (London: Routledge, 1945).

² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol 1., (London: Routledge, 1945), 171.

³ Peter Sloterdijk, *Microsphereology*, (London: Semiotext(e), 2011), 10-12.

⁴ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steve Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas The forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1977).

⁵ Venturi et al, (1977), 7.

⁶ Venturi et al, (1977), 7.

⁷ Venturi et al, (1977), 18.

⁸ William Hodges,, *Travels in India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 and 1783*, (London: J. Edwards), 1793.

⁹ Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985),

¹⁰ Anne Salmond, *Aphrodite's Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti*, Auckland. Penguin), 2009, 51.

¹¹ Serge Techerkezoff, "First Contacts in Polynesia: The Samoan Case (1722-1848)," (Canberra: ANU EPress, 2004), 42 -43.

¹² Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth.*" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 99.

¹³ Vincent Scully, *The Earth, The Temple and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979).