

What Architecture Tells Us about a Society

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The forms that public spaces and public and private architecture (what researchers call “the built environment”) take structure the social relationships of the people who build, interact, and dwell in them. This relationship is recursive, in that social norms inform the construction of a place, providing the social cues and information people need to negotiate that place. Essentially, we become who we are because of the constructed world that we walk through, a world that we simultaneously build because of who we are. It affects us, and we affect it.

Consider, for example, a bank located downtown in a metropolitan center: the sidewalk is accessible to everyone; the lobby is accessible to those who have business with the bank (or look like they have business with the bank); the area behind the tellers’ stations is accessible only to workers; and the vault is accessible to the smallest group of people, including a few employees and a fraction of the customers.

These patterns of accessibility reflect patterns in our social structure—and some of our social, political, and economic norms. The bank president can access the greatest amount of space; her employees can access the next largest amount; some customers can access both open and controlled space (i.e., the lobby and the vault); all customers can access the lobby; and those who violate societal norms apparent to the security guards (either because of destitution, potentially dangerous behavior, or any combination of a multitude of minute differences) are not even allowed to enter from the sidewalk.

The customers, upon whom the bank is founded and survives, are not allowed into areas that their money supports. The workers are allowed mostly free access to restricted space, and a select few can move about fairly freely. The foundation of the system, though, is not allowed free access to the system. Inequality is built in. Only on rare and shocking occasions—usually robberies or protests—do people who would generally make up the foundation of the system enter the restricted areas. Although this might not be a perfect analogy for understanding religious and political freedom, it does demonstrate how control and use of space conveys insight into various cultural aspects of a people.

Researchers thus examine the built environment for clues to understanding group cosmology (views about the nature and origins of the surrounding world), identity, and social structure. As in the bank example, these phenomena are encoded in the built environment. If control of ritual (think about who owns the bank and controls the money) is a principal route to power, as well as a means of endorsing unequal power relationships, then the level of ritual hierarchy, or control of ritual knowledge by a select few, should be reflected in architecture. The bank example arguably bears this out.

Because ritual organization affects social organization, and social organization affects spatial organization, we can infer ritual organization by carefully examining spatial organization in communities. This helps archaeologists examine the structure of knowledge-holding, or control of ritual power, within communities.

