

## Architectonic inquiry\*

JAMES W. FERNANDEZ

In *The Anatomy of Architecture* Suzanne Blier makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of an African architectonic. She does this for a part of Africa, the Western Sudan and Sudanic fringe or Sahel, and particularly among peoples, the Voltaic, whose 'logico-aesthetic integration' (Thompson 1945) of the diverse aspects of their lives into their built world has long impressed observers. The book greatly strengthens our archive of material on these specific traditions, on African architecture generally, and on all so-called 'primitive architecture' which symbolically condenses into itself so much of a culture's life world.

A careful reader of this text comes away reflecting on the impoverished meaning of modern building traditions, however complex the technical challenges and elaborate the aesthetic vocabulary and debate which occurs in respect to the styles of modern architecture. One comes away with a feeling for the relative insignificance of the signs of modern architecture compared with the symbolic loading, the crucial corporeal matters of life and death, of rebirth and revitalization, that are invested in Batammaliba building and building ritual.

For in these most interesting and appealing African buildings, well illustrated in the many plates and figures of this book, repose both the well-being of the cosmos or macrocosm, and the well-being of individual bodies or microcosms. In these buildings the most sacred forces of Batammaliba divinity and the most profane physiological forces of their corporeal humanity, the macrocosm and microcosm in short, are, through symbolic action, brought into revitalizing conjunction. This book in many ways, therefore, is an exemplary addition to the list of significant work by the Griaule School (Griaule [1965], Griaule and Dieterlein [1965], Lebeuf [1961]) and by other students of African architecture (specifically on these Sudanic traditions: Mercier [1954] and Prussin [1969]). To use the preferred

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phrase of the Griaule school this book makes a rich contribution to our knowledge of the '*système de connaissance*' or 'system of correspondences' that are present in this African Architectonic. I emphasize the rich tradition of similar studies to which this book adds because it is not Blier's manner to spend much time dealing with the contributions of her predecessors. Her concern is with the Batammaliba and her own somewhat eclectic theory of architectural 'being' (ontology) among them.

### **In search of the architectonic**

I want to make clear from the start the value of this book because I wish to offer a critique of its argument in the interest of advancing our understanding in theoretical terms of what we may mean by an 'architectonic'. It is a term used but undefined by the author. But it is a concept which I believe to be worth advancing in anthropology and in African studies (Fernandez 1977, 1979, 1982 [esp. Chapter 15], 1984, 1986). The reader, and, of course, the author must forgive me for invoking some of my own previous arguments on this issue. I feel that they have both a strong relation to Blier's argument and data and find confirmation in them. I would like, therefore, to use a discussion of this book to move us towards a more comprehensive definition of 'architectonic' as a central term for a theory of coherence in culture and for a method of investigation.

By 'architectonic' we may mean the feeling tone a constructed space arouses and the memories it evokes. This arousal and this 'evocativeness' are the interrelated components of a complex yet somehow coherent experience. It is an experience of past and present, of primary and secondary and emergent qualities, of the present space itself as a physical stimulus coupled with associations, recollections, recallings, memories of the past which arise by means of significant activities that take place in that space or by means of signs that are in some way attached to it. Blier's book is very much about the elements of this complex 'architectonic' experience. In some important respects it falls short of providing the reader with that experience in its fullest terms. A '*système de connaissance*' is a framework for understanding that experience but it is not the experience itself.

I have argued elsewhere (1982) that the only ethnography adequate to this architectonic experience is provided by the participant observation characteristic of anthropological fieldwork. This is because in living with a people over the long term, in inhabiting as one can their world and their buildings, one can begin to have in some holographic way their experiences of that world. Participant observation is also full of 'revelatory incidents' or 'social dramas' that give insight into both the unity and diversity of

local life and into the ambivalences, incongruities and contradictions of that life. It gives insight into the differences between a culture's attitudes and its platitudes.

Participant observation over the long term also 'familiarizes' the anthropologist with the social world of a people ... makes him or her aware of the tenor of their family life as it almost always, if often only in a fictive gesture of hospitality, makes of him or her, as it is said, 'family'. In most African cultures, at least those (the majority) which are not monument-creating cultures, buildings are always family structures. They are very much tied up with the structures of family life. The 'familiarity' of long term participant observation in the kinship societies such as those of the Batammaliba 'breeds' just that: 'familiarity'. It is a crucial source of knowledge about the 'other's' experience.

### **An architect's ethnography**

We want to ask ourselves, therefore, since Blier is not an anthropologist but an art historian, what kind of an ethnography she has written? Immediately one must say 'a very good one', but one which is not anthropological in certain important ways! It is a very good ethnography because she has made very close and detailed observations of Batammaliba houses and the activities surrounding them and, to some extent within them. She followed up these detailed and continuing observations with extensive and precise questioning about the reasons for the architectural forms and accoutrements and for the house-centered activities with over fifty principle informants who provided answers to her questions as they were able and above all supplied her with the myths and legends that were being re-created and recelebrated in house construction itself and in the subsequent rituals focused upon it. She kept carefully referenced fieldnotes and has appended precise reference to month of collection and page for all the supporting observations from informants or other local texts — such as myths — that she adduces to support her interpretations. In short, this is a precise and detailed ethnography of building form, building practice, and the associated meanings of these forms and practices as they reflect the macrocosm and the microcosm.

But this is primarily an observer's ethnography. Blier lived close by but does not appear to have lived *in* these houses for any length of time. One misses accounts, as I have said, of her 'familiar' participations in these villages and in family life, though she was lodged in a special hut constructed for her in a family compound. In part we miss a more embodied account of her synesthetic participation in these buildings, for the anthro-

pologist thinks not only through the head but through the body as well (Jackson 1983). Blier's style is objective and maintains a certain cool distance between herself and the Batammaliba however warmly she thanks many individual informants for their help and however she might dedicate her book to them. The inquiry seems in that way more sociological than anthropological ... more the method of 'extensity' (Doob: 1969) or survey than of 'intensity' — that is, of lengthy inhabitation and lengthy involvement through such familiarizing techniques of inquiry and participation as the extended life history. Blier might argue from Dilthey in her final chapter that 'experience is the source of all objectification' (p. 201) and that 'one of the primary concerns of architectural analysis is to explain buildings from the perspective of the experiences they provide', yet it is the overall impression of this reader and African ethnographer that the experience this book provides is largely external to these buildings and is, by indirection, to be obtained from the wealth of associations to them which are adduced.

By 'indirection' we arrive at the directions of experience. By this I mean that the 'objectification' of these structures Blier provides is primary and the experience had in them is intended to be read out of the objective observations. I don't want to deny the value of the observer's ethnography, especially one as detailed as this study. I simply want to point up the lack here of a dialectic with the participant's ethnography. This dialectic in anthropological ethnography and the reflexivity it produces, particularly in most recent ethnography, is, or should be, one main source of our feeling *for* and understanding *of* — 'familiarity' *with*, we can say — the local lifeways and local worlds being described and interpreted. Informants tend to appear in this account as just that ... providers of the apt phrases, the right legends, or crucial pieces of text — let us call them *ethnobites* — that will support the given interpretation.

There is, thus, some presence in this book of 'the architect's fallacy' — the presumption to be taking the internal, human experience of one's buildings into account when, in fact, it is the externals of the structure that are overridingly important. This should not surprise us. This book is written, it would appear, in a series largely intended for architects who would be mainly interested in these buildings as reservoirs and stimuli for architectural ideas — in the way, perhaps, that style in African masks influenced Picasso — and not as architectonic experiences of the people themselves. The impressive thing is how, given this context, Blier has everywhere resisted with stern scholarship the enthusiasms of facile architectural aesthetics and 'appreciation'. Still she has the tendency of the architect to be interested in buildings before people and to see people through buildings as, willy nilly, actors on the stages they provide.

No doubt every ethnography has to have its focus, and to focus on buildings can be — as it is here — most revelatory. Still one desires more narrativity of events in the lives of real people, more social dramas, than we are given — we are given very few — as a dialectical complement to the events in the 'lives' of real houses. It would have been rewarding to have had an extended account of a complete housebuilding from conception to realization with all the human drama that 'building a house' provides in Batammaliba land, as in the West.

For an anthropologist the lack of 'familiarity' and embodiment in this ethnography is indicated by the absence of any detailed reference to family structure and genealogy. If 'houses are human' and 'in complimentary relation with family life', as the author argues, one would want to have at the least, in order to complement the emphasis on building structures, much more detail on the family structures — the kind of detail that is derived from genealogical research — which is interwoven into the houses. But this kind of anthropological research, crucial in the 'kinship societies' such as the Batammaliba and part and parcel of the 'familiarity' that it is the ethnographic task to provide, is best made out of long term participation in family life. Blier lived close by a family but not within it. She mainly focused on a detailed survey and study of that set of fascinating and artful objects, Batammaliba houses, and she came to know people through them.

While it might be argued that there is hardly any other way to know people than through the objects in which they invest themselves — and that their houses are, as it is said, the most important 'investment' people ever make — still and ultimately people invest themselves in each other. And it is with these mutual investments — and the struggles over mutuality, domination or subordination involved — that ethnography should ultimately 'familiarize' us. Surely such struggles are present in house building and house living. Narrating such events for the reader of the ethnography would have provided crucial 'presuppositions to his or her understanding.'

There is another struggle characteristic of modern ethnographic fieldwork which is not present in this book (or in an older ethnography) — that is, the struggle over the achievement of a coherent interpretation in the face of the diversity of local understandings and of native interpretations. Blier tends to generalize about the Batammaliba group mind and typify them: 'Batammaliba believe', 'Batammaliba say', 'the Batammaliba do not see', etc. This overrides the contest of local views and makes unnecessary any account of differences of view among Batammaliba themselves as a challenge to the ethnographer's own coherent interpretation. The author refers, in her final chapter on exegesis, to the views of various ethnographers (Turner and Griaule particularly) on the power given to the 'trained scholar with extensive knowledge of the culture' (Turner) to arrive

at the exegesis of a coherence more correct or pretations and exegesis. Apparently she subscribes to the ethnographer a position of unregard. When there are local differences of interpretation which she is plentifully aware, her tendency is a consequence of the multiplexity of meaning a consequence of varying contexts of interpretation ethnography of the modern and postmodern period awareness of (1) its own constraining context a difficulty in choosing amidst variability in local points of view. It is, hence, (3) aware of its own totalizing account whose coherence is elaborated and mentioned.

### **The components of an architectonic**

Still an architectonic presumes some kind of provokes and the evocation it elicits. What an architectonic arousal and evocation, this overall sense of 'being'? This is the central question upon which this book goes a long way towards identifying that can be invested in buildings to give them substance. The first seven of the eight chapters of the book deal with the set of associations that can be invested in buildings: ontologic and cosmogonic associations to the creation of things; to ongoing cosmic processes; archetypal or prototypical original ancestral or aboriginal structures of buildings; orienting associations to central trajectories or paths; the house serves as a beginning or a guiding structure for these paths; anthropomorphic associations to human states of need or of satisfaction; vital associations to life that is to family, village, and clan reproduction; the face of death and internecine strife; political associations to individual, prestige and power; dramaturgical associations to a staging structure for life cycle events whether

cosmos, or with an ancestral building tradition, or with the basic vectors of life, or with corporeal or corporate well-being, or with the power and prestige of the group or dramaturgical celebration — with any or with all of these — then the potential for architectonic arousal reposes in it. The thing about the Batammaliba, as Blier demonstrates, is that all of these associations are built into or, at one time or another, are focused upon their buildings giving them the greatest architectonic evocativeness.

As I have elsewhere argued (1979), a built space, an architecture, is a 'quality space' characterized by primary, secondary, and emergent qualities which are attendant to life in that space and central to its arousal value. An account of architectonic form must be an account of these qualities attendant or emergent to life lived out in built spaces. Particularly important are the emergent qualities as these are identified in local lexicon. Here, although anchoring her account in the local qualitative vocabulary of building experience, Blier is less satisfying. It is true that she thoroughly lays the groundwork for understanding the associations that go into the emergent qualities of these buildings, and also provides us with, by reference to the noun class system, the semantic primitives or radicals, the categories of prefixes and noun roots that are most prevalent in conveying features of architectural significance to building identity: enclosedness or boundedness, directionality or orientation, completeness or perfectedness. This important review of the semantic primitives of architectural assessment needs to be, however, antecedent to and/or accompanied by (it comes in the very final pages of the book) an analysis of local texts containing them and, more especially, the central emergent qualitative terms of the architectonic.

### **The structure of associations**

As I hope we are coming to understand an architectonic approach is characterized by an analytic vocabulary: emergent (and convergent) qualities, quality space, 'familiarization', 'embodied understanding', vectorization, condensation. With the theory or theories (she is eclectic in this matter) that Blier subscribes to in her architectural analysis in mind, let me address myself to some elements of this analytic vocabulary in the interest of elaborating and clarifying it.

Let me first assess Blier's own theoretical, primarily semiotic, vocabulary. It is a very enriched one. She calls here on Saussure for a vocabulary of significance and signification and there on Peirce for a vocabulary of indexicality and iconicity. And she calls repeatedly on symbolic anthropologists, particularly Victor Turner, for a vocabulary of condensation, opposi-

tion, and incongruity, that is to say, multiplexity. Given both her attention to these semiotic vocables and her attention to the Batammaliba lexicon — on the other, vernacular terms relevant to the buildings would have been a desirable part of her documentation. What is a sign to the Batammaliba? There is not enough discussion of this in the literature (Turner).

But 'metaphor' is the persistently central term in her subtitle, 'Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Expression'. In this choice of central terms Blier is participating in the fashioning of the eighties, in the social sciences — the fashioning of thought and action — with metaphor as the central work in Africa which has made metaphor central. We must agree that it is, or should be, a central term. It is central because metaphor, in simple, is about the linkage of thought, and the focus of architectonic analysis. It makes it, about such linkage and the 'sense of coherence'. Architectonic ethnography, that is, is about the way that people invested in buildings — the way that they are linked to their experience. It is this linkage that, in large part, defines the spaces and arouses in their inhabitants certain meanings. These buildings to stand for, that is be coherent to themselves, something both much larger and more complex.

I have already reviewed Blier's ample attention to the architectonic meaning, the cosmic, ancestral, collective which are linked to these buildings. But let me return to her discussion of metaphor and ontology. For the sake of detail the many different metaphors that are at work in the Batammaliba houses: the various visual metaphors that are used upon them (nesting, direction giving, or pointing, or pointing, minimalization by synecdoche, reversal of direction, condensation, reiterated alignment). All of these metaphors are linked to macrocosmic (universe creation and reproduction) and microcosmic (human creation and reproduction) ideas and perhaps better 'condense into' the buildings and their meanings. These associated meanings.

between) microcosm and macrocosm bringing them, as they are embodied in the house, into interrelation and giving to the Batammaliba in relation to their houses a resonant architectonic body-in-world/world-in-body sense of wholeness or coherence. It is the appearance of coherence based on the resonances of detected analogies. Metaphors may point towards but do not by and large provide a clear comprehension of cultural coherence. For an architectonic is a set of associations, a network of analogies, which give a *sense* of coherence or 'logico-aesthetic integration' (wholeness) but not a clearly reasoned, conceptually clear set of ideas about it. That may be the cautious task of a student of architectonics like Blier. But even the student, as indeed Blier recognizes, is faced with many incongruities and obscurities. Indeed Blier's argument in this book shifts back and forth between the seeking of precise delineation of the meaning of this architecture and recognition of the obscurity and incongruity in these meanings.

Blier is attentive to a wide variety of other metaphors besides the purely visual, and rather abstract, ones of painted, incised, or sculpted design. She attends to the various objects such as paths, pots, bowls and baskets, forked and crossed sticks that appear in architectural contexts and, metaphorically linked to many other domains of experience, become symbolically charged with meaning. She shows how these objects, abstractly to be viewed as circles, lines, forks and crosses, provide basic ordering categories of Batammaliba experience. And she provides us with the culturally informed commentary of informants on the metaphoric linkages that make these objects symbolic.

It must be noted, however, that though the relation between metaphor and symbol is here raised — there is a tendency to grant the primacy of metaphoric linkage to the loading of symbol with condensed meaning — it is not satisfactorily resolved. Here Blier's eclectic style does not serve her well and she misses the possibility of clarity in the argument. For there is a risk of obscurity and incongruity by not distinguishing between these terms of analysis. It is an obscurity she shares with Victor Turner, by the way, who often collapsed symbol and metaphor. In Blier these terms are often used co-terminously or alternatively towards the same end. Yet it is the reading of the dynamic presence of metaphoric inter-domainal associations out of the condensation of meaning in symbols that is the main challenge of the kinds of interpretations undertaken in this book. That is to say, it is the relation between metaphoric *mediation* of domains of experience and symbolic *condensation* that is one of the dynamics at the heart of an architectonic as it is at the heart of the art of interpretation.

Ultimately, of course, it is the house itself which is the dominant and central metaphor (Blier prefers the term 'primary metaphor') of Batammaliba life as not only a concrete representation of the cosmos but also of

the human body physical and psychological. 'The human Batammaliba express an architectural view of their psychological dimensions of their own identity and define their own being' (p. 139). Without architecture there can be no long term resolution of human problems and a convincing statement could be made about architecture as a practical, as much if not more than a theoretical.

As Blier's title suggests, this book is about the human knowledge of the nature of 'being' or 'reality' and their architecture. And this is repeatedly confirmed by their thoughts, and feelings in building their houses and their relation to the cosmos, in relation to the vital events of life, and to sickness and death in a culture like this, and as the ethnography presents. I am (too easily) convinced that the ontology lies primarily in the buildings. These buildings are of the greatest reality to them. The buildings metaphorically body forth and link to a Batammaliba reality. But these buildings wouldn't exist without these metaphoric linkages across domains. These powers lie at the heart of the Batammaliba. Perhaps they do, though reposing in different forms in other if not all cultures. For though the ontology is bound to resonate with the human condition, for this reason, this book cannot help but be of sustained interest to a general reader whatever his or her relation to the tradition.

Let me end, before offering a final definition of ethnography, on this approbative note, for though I have offered criticisms and have even expressed misgivings about the book and its argument I do so with the intention of a deeper understanding of (1) the meanings of buildings and (2) the challenges of architectonic ethnography. This is done in a profound way by Blier. Because of our method of architectural inhabitation of other cultures, architecture is especially within the reach of anthropology and

Let me end with the definition of architectonic inquiry towards which we have been working. It is a definition based, in part, on previous work of my own but one which is advanced significantly from a reading of Blier's work.

An *architectonic inquiry* is an ethnography of human living structures that is based on participant observation in and familiarity with, at once, the tensions experienced in their construction and the feeling tone or tensions lived out in their inhabitation. One emphasizes tensions because tone and particularly feeling tone is the product of tensions produced in any instrument — in this case the human being — built to register and to mediate contrasting or opposing states. The tensions we have seen in this discussion not only have to do with the tension between participation and observation peculiar to ethnography but, in fact, have to do with the very human tension of entering into and withdrawing from ongoing social activity. Behind these tensions of entering and exiting is the mind-body tension, the tension, that is, between thinking with or through the body and thinking with or through the mind in doing ethnography.

An architectonic ethnography is a composition which seeks at once to register and mediate, if not overcome, these tensions as it seeks to register and mediate embodiment, on the one hand, and abstract analysis on the other. Insofar as the impetus to 'return to the whole' and obtain coherence by logico-aesthetic integration is prevalent in human activity, and often present in built spaces, it seeks to give an account of what is achieved by that impulse and how this is accomplished. In important part this will be an account of the set of associations, the inter-domain and intra-domain linkages. Architectonic inquiry is, furthermore, ethnography which seeks to understand the built-in tension between past and present, which is to say the tension, on the one hand, between the memories that become embedded or condensed into living structures through various signifying enactments formal or informal and which are subsequently evoked by these enactments and, on the other hand, the accommodated present-oriented routines of day-in and day-out living in constructed spaces. Finally an architectonic ethnography is, or should be itself an architectonic. It should be a construction that attempts to organize the reader's experience in such a way that he or she becomes convincingly aware of the feeling tone of living in constructed spaces by being made to both enter into and withdraw from them in the process of the exposition.

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James W. Fernandez (b. 1930) is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego. His principal research interests include figurative speech, the anthropology of religion, and the anthropology of culture. His recent publications are *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination* (1982), *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (1986), and *Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology* (1991).