

sofa beneath bay windows, darkened by the long porch awning outside. A stuffed and worn chair rests beneath a lamp in a third corner, commanding the room with comfort and presidential use. Stained pine wood planks and bricks support two softly illuminated fish tanks occupied by fish not entirely oblivious to the world around them, occasionally jumping for desperate freedom into the very air or cat paws that would take their tiny lives. A shaggy carpet of ambiguous colour stretches across the floor like a sea. The low gaze soars over this sea. In a corner of the double doorway, a dark curved scar in the floorboards sweeps around the white-painted frame, lending a ridged texture to the otherwise smooth surface of the wood. An echo of

Funerals allow families and communities to share in the passage from life to afterlife. Rituals are also like milestones in that they divide life, the construction process, and the seasons into clearly defined phases. Order is made manifest in this way because these ritual milestones tell us "where we are," and the connection and continuity between where we are, where we are going, and where we have been is made clear.

In the life of the house, the need for continuity is seen in the practice of carrying fire from old dwelling to new. The hearth is the heart of the building, and the fire that burns there is its life-blood. It is common in many cultures to ceremonially transfer the fire from the old house when a move is made. This quest for continuity may have been what the Roman settlers had in mind when they carried soil from their home town and buried it in the earth when inaugurating a new town on the frontier.⁸

thresholds When we enter a space that is charged with meaning for us – a church, a formal office, a hospital – we pause at the threshold and gather ourselves. A ceremony allows us the same opportunity in life transitions. In ritual, we acknowledge to ourselves, to the community, and perhaps to the spirits, that we are leaving behind one phase of life and entering another. On the threshold of this new beginning, we pause and gather our own strength as well as that of family and community before stepping into the unknown future.

BUILDING RITES

Order, manifested in human life, in building, and in the life of the cosmos, creates cycles and patterns that are similar in character. In many indigenous societies, the passage between stages in a cycle calls for a ceremony to bring human life and building into harmony with the order of things. A close look at the rites of building may reveal how order is created and maintained through the building process.

The act of building in accordance with cosmological order begins with the selection of a site. Whereas typical site selection criteria would focus on how the site could best serve our economic, aesthetic or technical needs, people in many indigenous cultures see themselves as servants of the land and begin by asking if their intended use is right for the land. The Tibetans of Ladakh are very clear about who owns the land; their "most respected and feared Gods" are the Sab Dag, the soil-owners, spirits that must be placated with offerings before construction can begin.⁹

Order in its more commonplace usage, as the opposite to disorder, comes into play in testing the propitiousness of the site. In many cases, a ceremonial object (a stake or a pile of cowries) is placed on the site overnight and, if it remains standing in the morning, the site is considered suitable for building. If it is disturbed (disordered), then another site is chosen. The Batammaliba break a clay pot and make a pile from the shards for this purpose. In many cases the site is tested by a priest or astrologer, one who is *ordained*, in touch with the order of the universe. It is often the priest who chooses both the site and the date on which building may commence. The day of ground-breaking is often determined in accordance with astrological principles so as not to disrupt the harmony between the people and the gods, even if it means waiting several months for construction to begin.

ground-breaking The term ground-breaking implies an awareness that we are taking something whole and breaking it. Among indigenous people, this awareness gives rise to the ground-breaking ceremony, which seeks to restore the order that is disrupted when breaking the ground that separates our world from the



Indigenous builders like this Blackfoot woman often integrate a ritual bundle of plants and earth into their structures. (Barrett, *The Thunder Tipi*, film.)

⁸ Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976) 10.



Ceremonial foundation-bleeding of a wedding-house, Gabra nomads, Kenya. (Prussin, *Nagayati: Arts and Architecture among the Gabra Nomads of Kenya*, video.)

⁹ Powell, *Tibetan Houses in Ladakh*, 59.

underworld. For the Lao, the god of the soil is called Naga. The Tibetan refugees of Ladakh, as we have seen, call the same spirit Sab Dag. People in both cultures consider construction, especially ground-breaking, disruptive to the soil-gods, and they have devised ceremonies intended to bring the construction process into harmony with the spirits of the site.

Among the Taneka of Benin, construction is considered so potentially disturbing to the earth that a special earth-priest is made surrogate owner of the site during construction to ensure that the building process does not harm the earth.¹⁰ Elsewhere in Benin, the Batammaliba architect gathers the shards of the clay pot used to test the site and places them in the foundation of the house as it is formed, ensuring that not only the intangible symbolic action of the ritual, but also the tangible symbolic object, the pot, will remain a part of the completed building.¹¹ The incorporation of a ritual object into the building occurs in many cultures. A ritual bundle, usually composed of sacred plants, can be found in houses ranging from the tipis of the Blackfoot Indians of the North American Plains to the leaf-covered, timber frame dwellings of the Maring in New Guinea.^{12,13}

The ceremonial foundation of the Gabra wedding-house, or *mandasse*, is made up of branches from the acacia tree. It is laid out in a circle, matching the form of the house to be built. Then it is blessed by the bride, groom, and family members, who sprinkle water on the sacred branches.¹⁴ The foundation marks the point where the house joins the earth and sky, rising out of the broken ground and entering the world above. Like ground-breaking, it crosses a boundary between two worlds. The builders, the Gabra women, acknowledge this crossing ceremonially.

sky-breaking Just as we run the risk of disturbing the spirits of the world below by breaking the ground, so we are in danger of a similar transgression when we build up and into the sky. The heavens are the home of the gods, and sky-breaking ceremonies express the builder's awareness that the roof rises into heaven with a healthy respect and fear for the gods, not in competition with them. Western mythology has its own cautionary tales of the hubris of building up into heaven and the wrath it incurs - the tower of Babel, for example - and although less common than ground-breaking ceremonies, topping out ceremonies remain a part of Western building culture. Many carpenters still nail a bough of pine to the ridge-beam to celebrate the completion of a house's framing.

In the topping out ceremony for a Batammaliba house, the architect passes a black hen and a white rooster over the newly completed wall. The feathers of the two birds are incorporated into the wall, with a prayer that the remaining construction, as well as the lives of the occupants, will be blessed. This ritual also incorporates a method of payment, in that while both birds are provided by the owner, the architect gets to keep the rooster.¹⁵

wall-breaking One building ceremony that has not carried over to Western construction is the ritual that accompanies the cutting of an opening in a wall. Doors and windows are seen as places where evil spirits may enter the house, and special precautions are taken to keep the spirits out. The installation of skulls and other charms which close doorways to earth and sky demons in Ladakh is accompanied by the prayer, "Let not your servants injure us when we build a house."¹⁶ Another Tibetan custom involves a ceremony to mark the placement of lintels over windows and doors, and in the Batammaliba house, a special hole is cut in the roof to let the spirits of those who might one day die inside escape. It is covered by a heavy stone at all other times to prevent unwanted spirits from entering the house.¹⁷

killing the house Perhaps the most universal building rite is the opening ceremony. In even the most informal house-warming party, we acknowledge the death of the construction process and the birth of the new life of the building (opening ceremonies are sometimes referred to as "killing the house"). The

¹⁰ Thomas McDonald Shaw, *Taneka Architecture and Village Structure in Northwestern Benin*, Ph. D. Dissertation (Columbia University, 1981) 53.

¹¹ Blier, *The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression*, 24.

¹² Samuel Barrett, *The Thunder Tipi*, film, 1964.

¹³ Allison and Marek Jablonko, *Kerepe's House: A House Building in New Guinea*, film, 1966.

¹⁴ Prussin, *Nagayati: Arts and Architecture among the Gabra Nomads of Kenya*.

¹⁵ Blier, *The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression*, 29.

¹⁶ Powell, *Tibetan Houses in Ladakh*, 62.

¹⁷ Blier, *The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression*, 30.

opening ceremony plays the important role of weaving together the life of the building and the life of its inhabitants. The Gyang Len ceremony in Tibet, for example, is performed on completion of a couple's new house and once yearly thereafter on their wedding anniversary.¹⁸

For the Batammaliba, the cutting of the spirit-hole in the roof is part of an elaborate opening ceremony. A pot of beer is placed in the centre of the room directly below the freshly-cut roof opening. The architect lights a torch and passes it into all the dark corners of the house, ending by thrusting it toward the spirit-hole. He then starts a fire behind the pot and the guests gather around, the architect's family on one side and the owner's on the other. As they drink down the beer, the owner's father builds two small shrines, one for his own family and one for the architect's. The owner then offers a prayer, welcoming the architect's family into the new house, and a feast of beer and chicken ensues.¹⁹

RITUAL, ORDER, AND THE NEW BUILDING CULTURE

Should we, in our own practice as architects, be passing chickens back and forth across walls as we complete our buildings? A resurgence of old ceremonial practices or the introduction of indigenous building rites is not necessarily what we need. We can, however, let the new rituals of construction grow as an appropriate response to modern life and building technology. Every culture has its own symbolic actions and objects whose meanings come out of mythology and the collective mind. The raising of the "Spirit of Democracy" statue in Tiananmen Square and the toppling of statues of Lenin and Stalin across Russia are just two examples of how every culture finds appropriate actions and objects as expressions of order. The universal quest for order should manifest itself in building ceremonies tailored to fit the local culture.

Ritual is not a nostalgic artifact. It is alive today and waiting for us to use it in re-establishing the connection between our lives, our architecture, and our world. Indigenous people are already creating new ways for their rituals to bring order into lives reeling from the impact of Western society on their traditional cultures. The Kayapo Indians of Brazil, for instance, combined their ritual corn-dance with the latest video technology in successfully joining forces to stop construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Amazon.²⁰

One problem with the rituals that are still incorporated into our own building culture is that they are, in many ways, just for show – they do not help to form a meaningful whole of the building process. There is, therefore, not much to be gained by reintroducing rituals for their own sake. We need a unified building process where the creation of order is paramount, and ritual follows naturally as an expression of order. In this way, the act of construction, the art of design and the experience of ritual mesh together in a process that brings life, building, and nature together in the realization of order.

the presence of heavy oak doors, this form could not be erased by the buzzing force of mechanical floor sanders and remained to evoke the work and life of earlier residents, each ancient passage accompanied by voices long gone.

Through another double doorway lies a wide muddy red carpet; the gaze stretches across a floor otherwise unimpeded by furniture. To one side, a simple bench chest of stained pine holds winter sweaters and a short stack of stories inscribed on shiny black vinyl: hard-stored voices, tense with potential communication. There are two doors to another side, framed in the same dark oak, the one on the left leading to the blackest closet, deep and frightening. Among the fluttering heavy cloth carrying an air of the

¹⁸ Corlin, *The Organization of Space in a Tibetan Refugee Settlement*, 89.

¹⁹ Blier, *The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression*, 30.



From cutting the timbers in the forest to placing the ridge-beam atop the house frame, indigenous architects combine ritual, design, and construction in a unified building process. House-raising in Madagascar. (Coulaud, *The Zufimaniry House: A Witness of the Traditional Houses of the Highlands of Madagascar* in Izikowitz, 194.)

²⁰ Kayapo: *Out of the Forest*, film.

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