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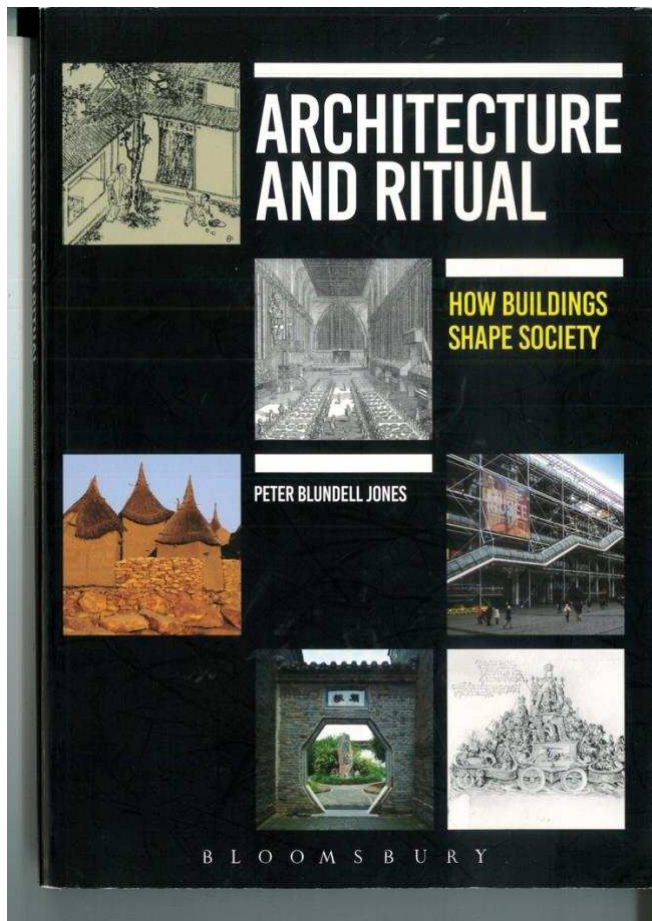


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An organic connection with China Xiang Ren on Architecture and Ritual



Architecture and Ritual
Peter Blundell Jones
New York and London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016
ISBN: 9781472577474
Hb, pp. 365.

Architecture and Ritual was Peter Blundell Jones's final book before his untimely death¹. Resulting from 10 years' effort,² it returns to his tried-and-tested case study approach following his well-known 'Modern Architecture through Case Studies' – out of which the initial idea for this book emerged. Ritual theory and practice have been widely discussed,³ touching on key concepts in architectural discourse such as user perception, but this book is the first deep study into architecture and its connected rituals supported by building studies from a wide geographical range and over a long timescale. The aim of the book is to

investigate how architecture influences repetitive daily routines, demonstrating the hugely overlooked value behind that link.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part 'Power and Politics' explores the interrelations between the ritual organisation and its political settings through four individual building studies: two in London, one in Imperial China and the other in Germany under the Third Reich. The second part, 'People and Their Territories', traces five pre-industrial cases under indigenous group cultures, which ranges from Africa, to Asia, and native America, to examine rituals in relation to cosmology in so-called indigenous places and to bodily movement. The third part, 'Modernities', penetrates the static categorisations of post/modern periods, and reveals how the relationships between people and building has been changed by technology and modern bureaucracy through reinterpreting different building types from healthcare to cultural projects. The conclusion investigates the value of user participation in responding to the changing conditions of the discipline and the profession.

The book starts with a critical commentary challenging normal hegemonic assumptions, beginning with a (re)definition. It has been long debated that whether there is a distinction between building and architecture and indeed whether that distinction could be achieved. Nikolaus Pevsner famously referred to the bicycle shed as an example of apparently low-class structures or artefacts of plain form and appearance. 'A bicycle shed is a building: Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture', Pevsner wrote. 'Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.'⁴ Blundell Jones respectfully disagreed here, arguing that architecture is deeply linked to the concept of meaning and identity beyond the immediate convenience of functional fit and intentional aesthetic message, which has to be established during social use and in turn shaping society by 'providing a mirror that reflects our world, our knowledge about it and the way we interact with it.'⁵ Therefore 'architecture has to mesh with the habits, beliefs, rituals and expectations of the society that created it', and such meshing between spaces and rituals of use tends to reinforce the built environment and activities in relation to beliefs. It is a socio-spatial practice and process, not merely an object-oriented production, and should be differentiated in accordance with uses and meaning.⁶ Drawn from deeper readings of such processes, Blundell Jones posits the (re)definition of ritual – as 'a shared interaction with the world and its displacement into private obsession'.⁷

Blundell Jones had a long standing interest in ritual issues in architecture, alongside his consistent enthusiasm for European organic modernism, which can be seen from his early pieces such as 'Implicit Meanings' which he regarded his first publication about how buildings frame social rituals drawing examples from anthropology⁸, and can also be seen from his third essay of the four-part series 'In Search of Authenticity'⁹ in which the sustaining ritual invoked. Closely related to organic modernism, whose architects and buildings Blundell Jones had worked on in terms of 'thicker' interpretations, the issue of architecture and ritual thrived for him around discussions about site-specificity, spatial progression and organisation, craftsmanship, and the freedom and repetition of bodily movement in space. It had been present in ideas of the vernacular which he believed had been ousted by the academic tradition. Thus, 'to look at the vernacular, and at anthropologists' accounts of how buildings were used and what they meant', expanded Blundell Jones's interests. Particularly when he found the idea which he committed most of his life's work to exploring: 'Häring's architectural ideal, fully endorsed by Scharoun, was that the building should be allowed to grow out of the local conditions: the place and the needs of the inhabitants.'¹⁰ This is the fundamental question about architecture that Blundell Jones wanted to pose and indeed answer. Hence his interpretation of those cross-cultural 'ritual sites', from British palace to African tribes, from aboriginal ceremonial grounds in Australia, to the 'Yamen' and Dong villages in China.

I will focus here on Chinese material in the book. This is not only because of my own background and research interest as an international outsider, but also as a possible clue tracing a shift in Blundell Jones's theoretical interests from Europe to the Far East. Blundell Jones believed the expansion of the concept of 'ritual' beyond its reductive modern and western usage remained well illustrated by Chinese traditional practice.¹¹ During the writing and preparation of this book, Blundell Jones engaged in at least three fieldtrips to China, each around a month long, with intensive visits to villages and cities in the North, South-East and South-Western parts of China. The East-West Centre for Architecture and Landscape at the University of Sheffield at which he was full Professor from 1994 developed rapidly during this decade, particularly in its fruitful quarterly seminars involving related PhD researchers and visiting scholars. Indeed, at undergraduate level, Blundell Jones introduced most of the chapter cases of 'Architecture and Ritual' to first year architecture students in his weekly Humanity lectures.¹²

For a Western social science scholar, to understand China is to understand the interactions and relationships between state and society, space and time, and nature and culture. Blundell Jones included two chapters about China in this book: Chapter Four in Part One talks about the ritual operation of the 'Yamen' building type during the Imperial period with a case study from Neixiang county. Chapter Ten in Part Two illustrates a variety of building types and associated rituals in Dong minority villages, ranging from rain and water bridges, gateways and drum towers, to ordinary houses. Both cases were deeply rooted in the social structures of locality. Blundell Jones's choice was thoughtful, as the case of Dong indigenous village relatively corresponds to the 'little tradition'¹³, and the case of 'Yamen' symbolizes the opposite 'great tradition' as an official building type. It was not the intention in of Blundell Jones's book to assess whether they could form a dialectical dialogue rather to open a door to the deeper understanding of China from the two poles of state and society.

The Chinese character '间' can be taken as an instance of talking about the connection of time and space: '间' is shared by the term 'space' ('空间' in Chinese) and the term 'time' ('时间' in Chinese), as well as the term 'room' ('房间' in Chinese, in which the single character '房' means the building). '间' is itself a terminology with much richer and more multiple meanings in Chinese architectural ideologies, ranging from typical units and modular systems in complex architectural construction, to the space in-between, to the threshold between exteriority and interiority. This illustrates the sophisticated notion interwoven between space and time in Chinese architecture. Indeed, traditional cosmology in China was a complex system of interpretation based on the interaction between nature and culture, including a series of local tacit and culturally-specific knowledges supported by puzzling and sometimes untranslatable concepts, such as Qi.

Blundell Jones confronted these theoretical dilemmas. In his investigation of 'Yamen', he looks at the ritual passage through space, finding that the sacred progression through a series of halls and courts in the southward orientation corresponded to the principles in traditional Chinese Daoist cosmology, such as the alternate cycles of 'Yin' and 'Yang' which connected the virtuous and the wicked¹⁴. To interpret '间', Blundell Jones detailed described what its use was and analysed how it worked, such as the specific choice for the magistrate of his arriving time of the day in that specific setting was guided and governed by the complex Chinese lunar calendar and its Daoist foundation. Supposed to constitute the flow through 'dragon veins', Qi as natural energy driving all life underpinned Feng-Shui practices, where the positive Qi should be facilitated and negative Qi controlled¹⁵. Blundell Jones links this culturally specific concept to a series of characters, which includes courtyards as outside rooms, marking threshold, a sense of direction in spatial layering within the 'Yamen' complex, to blocking ceremonies and physically-useless bridges and gateways evident in the remote Dong villages. Blundell Jones investigates the multi-stage communal rituals and narratives in Dong oral architecture without written scripts. The building rituals, both at ceremonial

buildings and ordinary family houses, not only enhanced questions of direction and orientation as well as the controller of Qi and adjuster of Feng-Shui, but also revealed the depth of a range of interlocking topics from indigenous carpentry to the binary number system based on traditional Daoist numerology. Furthermore, the detailed description of ten specific stages of building rituals for a typical Dong house strongly demonstrated that, 'like other social rituals, the building rituals transmit shared knowledge and mythology, but more particularly they define what a house is.'¹⁶

Taking architecture as a point of departure, Blundell Jones engaged with long-held ideas from the discipline of anthropology. 'A Chinese Phase in Social Anthropology' was first predicted by Bronisław Malinowski in 1939 and extended in 1963 by his distinguished student, later the first Dean of the Department of Anthropology at LSE, Maurice Freedman.¹⁷ These anthropologists sketched out an ambition to push the discipline from researching what could be imagined to be simple societies (such as in Africa and western Pacific islands) to what could be seen as more complex societies, approaching China as both a raw material in specific and Chinese studies as a methodology in general. The consensus was that Chinese anthropological studies should be different from those for western Pacific islands as researched by Malinowski. Blundell Jones was deeply engaged with the social-anthropological concepts of China throughout these two chapters, in his exploration of culturally-specific spatio-temporal ideas. However, he seems not to have attempted to answer the question which challenged several generations of social anthropologists: whether the whole body of local Chinese knowledge from the discussion of architecture and ritual could be pushed into an alternative theoretical paradigm in contrast or compliment to the existing paradigms, or through some kinds of culture-neutral paradigm which could be transferred elsewhere as a part of fundamental methodology in anthropological studies. This refers not merely to an ambitious dream about universal rules or solutions, but a body of knowledge imagined as a contribution to broader humanity research generalizing Chinese specific studies as a transferrable method. It is anticipated that this would have been confronted in Blundell Jones's next planned monograph, on Chinese architecture and the village, though sadly that was not to be. Deeply influenced by anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas¹⁸, Blundell Jones contested the ambition towards universal solutions like the Miesian aesthetic in architecture. Instead, he appreciated a deeper understanding and thicker interpretation through a piecemeal, laborious process with raw, rough and sometimes messy materials to be founded in locality and local knowledge.

Throughout 'Architecture and Ritual', Blundell Jones approaches different ritual materials as a whole -- not only Chinese materials -- and investigates the origin, evolution and accumulation of local knowledge and its ongoing impact on locals' everyday routines. This investigations range from Australian aboriginal Hunter-Gatherer architecture to the native American Oglala Sioux, and from the Tukanoan in the northwestern Amazon to the Dogon village of Mali. 'Perhaps architecture was born of ritual'¹⁹, he reflected, challenged what he perceived to be the omission of architectural rituals in contemporary discourse. Thinking outside the sanitised environment of the academic world, Blundell Jones reasserted that architecture is not purely about technical solutions or artistic objects, but a social process given social meaning, which has gained social value and been reshaped by social relations. Just as, for China, as 'the other great independently founded culture of Asia',²⁰ Blundell Jones examined its architecture through a whole site-specific time-space institution which related to clan-community, lineage, family, marriage, annual cycles, seasonal worship and everyday rituals. In this way, Blundell Jones not only made an organic connection between architecture and social-anthropology in Chinese studies, but also an organic one between East and West, just as his heroes Häring and Scharoun had done before.²¹ Furthermore, he demonstrated again that architecture was, and could still be, a shared way to be in the world, to sustain memory for the past and hold out hope for the future.

Notes

1. Peter Blundell Jones untimely died after a very short period of illness on the afternoon of 19 August 2016.
2. Notes from keynote presentation from Peter Blundell Jones given in the research symposium 'Habits, Beliefs, and Tacit Knowledge: Everyday Ritual in East Asian Villages' organised by the author at Sheffield School of Architecture on 30 June 2016.
3. For the anthropological discussions on the topic of rituals, see Mary Douglas 1966; Victor Turner, 1969; also recent ones for example, Catherine Bell 1997; 2009.
4. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, 7th edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 15.
5. Peter Blundell Jones, *Architecture and Ritual* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p.3.
6. Peter Blundell Jones, 'A Forty Year Encounter with Hans Scharoun'. PhD thesis by publication, School of Architecture, University of Sheffield (2013), p. 51.
7. Blundell Jones, *Architecture and Ritual*, p.8.
8. Peter Blundell Jones, '*Implicit Meanings*', *Architectural Review*, 6 (1985), 34-39.
9. Peter Blundell Jones, '*In Search of Authenticity*', *The Architects' Journal*, 19 (1991), 22-25.
10. Blundell Jones, 'A Forty Year Encounter with Hans Scharoun', p. 50.
11. Blundell Jones, *Architecture and Ritual*, p.68.
12. Notes from Peter Blundell Jones's brief for ARC 104 Humanity 2 Architecture and Society, School of Architecture, University of Sheffield (2016), p. 2.
13. First introduced in sociological and anthropological studies by Robert Redfield, 'little tradition' refers to the culture of ordinary people. In Chinese cases it particularly refers to the life-culture of peasants in China, while the opposite 'great tradition' refers those from high culture led by state, gentry, and other ruling classes. See Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*, 1956.
14. Blundell Jones, *Architecture and Ritual*, p.86.
15. Ibid, 89-90.
16. Ibid, p.239.
17. Maurice Freedman, 'Sociology in China: A Brief Survey', *The China Quarterly*, 10 (1962), 166-173; Maurice Freedman, 'A Chinese Phase in Social Anthropology', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 1 (1963), 1-19.
18. Blundell Jones, 'A Forty Year Encounter with Hans Scharoun', p. 3.
19. Blundell Jones, *Architecture and Ritual*, p.115.

20. Ibid, p.13.

21. Blundell Jones, 'A Forty Year Encounter with Hans Scharoun', p. 44.

See also: Peter Blundell Jones, '*The Lure of the Orient: Scharoun and Häring's East-West Connection*', *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2008), 29-42.