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Thinking houses through time.

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Thinking houses through time. Comment on ‘Revisiting the Trelleborg house. A discussion of house types and assemblages by Anna Beck (Manuscript ID SARC-2017-0033.R1)

Stephanie Wynne-Jones¹

In this article, Beck usefully deconstructs the idea of house types as reified categories and does important work in thinking through the constellation of features that make up the Trelleborg house in different places and times. Her consideration of the component architectural features of Trelleborg houses and their different chronologies and origins punctures the notion that the type appeared fully formed, and the concept of assemblage that she uses to explain this drawing together of pre-existing features is a powerful one. She adds both precision and nuance to the concept of house type, and achieves her aim of problematising the type concept as applied to the houses of Viking Age southern Scandinavia.

Assemblage theory is a powerful conceptual tool to approach the house. In this paper Beck focuses only on the ways that assemblage thinking allows a more dynamic concept of type as a constellation of features, and she works with architectural and material features rather than the social and conceptual aspects that may have been part of that mix. It is not my intention here to critique that approach, yet I note that assemblages might also have offered multiple ways of exploring the movement of people, practice and meaning into and out of those constellations (Harris 2017; Hamilakis and Jones 2017). Beck alludes to this throughout, suggesting that assemblage theory allows ‘a complex interpretation of how architectural traditions emerge, are maintained and disassembled again in an ongoing process of ‘becoming’ (p. 22ff). This brings in aspects of temporality, both in the past through ‘what is done with, in and around the specific house’ (p22ff) and possibly in the present as archaeologists and the general public find the category useful and compelling (e.g. Ancient Pages 2017; UNESCO website 2011).

In this comment, I would like to explore some of these routes by which practice and agency might have been built into reconsiderations of type. I would like to suggest that the ways that houses were created, lived in, and maintained by contemporary actors is crucial to understanding them as categories. Second, I advocate a diachronic approach to house type, which continues up to the present and explores how the category comes together in different times and places: a biography not of individual houses, but of the category of house itself. This analysis echoes some of the aims of assemblage theory, focusing on the ‘processes of individuation ..., rather than the end results’ (Harris 2017: 134). Yet, I am particularly inspired by the work of Van Oyen (2015), whose use of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to explore the creation of types in the archaeological record pushes us to think about categories as they were created in multiple times and places, not least in the contemporary archaeological endeavour.

Houses are increasingly viewed and analysed as a form of material culture; yet houses also differ from portable objects in that they serve as containers for action, offering opportunity and constraint (Lucas 2016). This ambiguity of scale has meant that houses exist across extremely varied traditions of archaeological enquiry. Many fruitful recent approaches have embraced that duality, exploring how houses both reflect and affect daily life; almost universally these have involved an exploration of the

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ways that people understood and used space within the house (Allison 2004; Johnson 2010; Gilchrist 1994). Those that explicitly reference assemblage theory have also tended to explore the materiality of the house, drawing on the materials of construction and their own agency – for example the use of building materials that need constant renovation, which require a cycle of activity from the inhabitants (Lucas 2016).

In my own work, I have explored one of the quintessential house types for exploring the materiality of space: the Swahili stone house of the eastern African coast. Donley-Reid's (1990) work on the contemporary Swahili house as a structuring structure was a compelling study that invoked a world of action. Her analysis moved between archaeology and ethnography, building on contemporary uses and understandings of space to build a model of the Swahili stone house as both a reflection of social structures and an active force in shaping them. What emerged powerfully was the importance of the house in structuring relations and claims to patrician identity in the late 20th century. Although this reflects many of the socio-political and economic pressures of the time (Fleisher 2015), it is striking that the house was an important category for inscribing and displaying identity. Contemporary Swahili made strong claims to historicity for these meanings; the past was for them a key part of how the category was defined.

I use the word 'category' rather than type very deliberately, following Van Oyen's (2015) deconstruction of archaeological types as *categories* defined in particular places and times. Stone houses first appeared on the eastern African coast in the 14th century. They contained subdivisions that in many cases might be thought of as similar to the ideal layout recorded by Donley-Reid, but in other instances were very different. These stone houses were themselves a development of a wattle and daub architectural tradition, and some early 'stone' houses were built of coral in a daub matrix (Horton 1996); they were probably always in a minority in townscapes dominated by wattle and daub architecture. Building in coral represented a new medium, previously employed for mosques and tombs, and involving a particular engagement with the marine environment (Fleisher n.d.). The materials ushered in a new temporality of occupation, with greater longevity in the townscape but the need for regular maintenance. They also seem to have brought with them some different ways of occupying space; household excavations at Songo Mnara, for example, have shown that domestic activities in wattle and daub houses tended to occur outside the doors in public spaces, while in the stone houses they were contained, moved into interiors and walled courtyards (Wynne-Jones 2013). They were settings for craft activities of particular kinds and were probably also important settings for claims to place: structured deposits in the foundations suggest significant investment in their foundation (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2016). Stone houses as a category, then, were not instances of an ideal type, but coalesced through a combination of materials and practices. These would have cross-referred, and the category is multi-scalar in that they existed as part of a regional tradition and a broader world of building using coral, and of merchant housing (Um 2009).

During the centuries after the arrival of the Portuguese, from the early 16th century, data are scarce for stone houses (as for all parts of Swahili culture). The houses, and the towns of which they were part, seem often to have been abandoned. Yet the category persisted, and during the period of Omani domination it was re-formed with new spatial logics and social structures (Bissell 2018), but with a similar ontological role. The historical tradition of living in stone on the Swahili coast contributed to this later category, as did social practices derived from Omani courtyard houses (although see Nagy 1998). This period was also one in which new ways of defining civilised behaviour were being created, along

with shifts in the ways status was defined as a group rather than an individual characteristic, linked to purity and piety (Iliffe 2005: 34-5). These shifts in social identities were played out in the category of the stone house, which also became the setting for new (secluded) social roles for women.

In the twentieth century, the stone house category became important in the definition of a new form of culture again, among archaeologists working to explore Swahili civilisation. Qualities of the stone house that had previously been important markers of social status, such as the permanence in the townscape, now became crucial to the archaeological process due to their relative preservation. The category of the stone house was defined again by researchers, for whom the materials of construction became both practically and conceptually important as a defining type shared along the coast (Allen 1979). As with each of these moments in the categorisation of the stone house, history was important. In this case the Omani period overshadowed earlier phases, and it is now our task to reconstruct exactly how stone houses were a category in the 14th century. Although some practices were different, there were also numerous similarities between the ways that people occupied wattle and daub houses and those of coral; some of the ways of inhabiting the stone house may have developed only gradually, shaped by the spaces themselves and the opportunities they afforded.

There is not the space here for a full discussion of this trajectory, and this is necessarily brief. My aim is to provide a comparative example of the ways a house type became a category at different historical moments. In this I follow Van Oyen in her use of ANT-inspired concepts, yet this exploration of the trajectory of a category chimes with the aims of assemblage theory. In exploring an archaeological type, Van Oyen (2015: 74) suggests that ANT's notion of stabilisation is crucial; exploring how and when categories stabilised, rather than focussing on processes of becoming (although cf. Fowler and Harris 2015). Beck's article moves us towards analysis of the trajectory of the Trelleborg house category, yet the moments of stabilisation would have been interesting aspects for discussion. At what moments and how did the category coalesce (assemble?) and what were the engagements, material, practical and academic, that caused that categorical stability? Elsewhere, Beck has published a biography of a Trelleborg house (cited in text); to reassess the type itself it would be valuable to think through a biography of the Trelleborg category as understood by inhabitants, contemporaries, and archaeologists themselves.

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