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### Thinking houses through time.

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Manuscripts

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3 **Thinking houses through time.** Comment on 'Revisiting the Trelleborg house. A discussion of house  
4 types and assemblages by Anna Beck (Manuscript ID SARC-2017-0033.R1)  
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8 **Stephanie Wynne-Jones<sup>1</sup>**  
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10 In this article, Beck usefully deconstructs the idea of house types as reified categories and does  
11 important work in thinking through the constellation of features that make up the Trelleborg house in  
12 different places and times. Her consideration of the component architectural features of Trelleborg  
13 houses and their different chronologies and origins punctures the notion that the type appeared fully  
14 formed, and the concept of assemblage that she uses to explain this drawing together of pre-existing  
15 features is a powerful one. She adds both precision and nuance to the concept of house type, and  
16 achieves her aim of problematising the type concept as applied to the houses of Viking Age southern  
17 Scandinavia.  
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20 Assemblage theory is a powerful conceptual tool to approach the house. In this paper Beck focuses only  
21 on the ways that assemblage thinking allows a more dynamic concept of type as a constellation of  
22 features, and she works with architectural and material features rather than the social and conceptual  
23 aspects that may have been part of that mix. It is not my intention here to critique that approach, yet I  
24 note that assemblages might also have offered multiple ways of exploring the movement of people,  
25 practice and meaning into and out of those constellations (Harris 2017; Hamilakis and Jones 2017). Beck  
26 alludes to this throughout, suggesting that assemblage theory allows 'a complex interpretation of how  
27 architectural traditions emerge, are maintained and disassembled again in an ongoing process of  
28 'becoming'' (p. 22ff). This brings in aspects of temporality, both in the past through 'what is done with,  
29 in and around the specific house' (p22ff) and possibly in the present as archaeologists and the general  
30 public find the category useful and compelling (e.g. Ancient Pages 2017; UNESCO website 2011).  
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34 In this comment, I would like to explore some of these routes by which practice and agency might have  
35 been built into reconsiderations of type. I would like to suggest that the ways that houses were created,  
36 lived in, and maintained by contemporary actors is crucial to understanding them as categories. Second,  
37 I advocate a diachronic approach to house type, which continues up to the present and explores how  
38 the category comes together in different times and places: a biography not of individual houses, but of  
39 the category of house itself. This analysis echoes some of the aims of assemblage theory, focusing on  
40 the 'processes of individuation ..., rather than the end results' (Harris 2017: 134). Yet, I am particularly  
41 inspired by the work of Van Oyen (2015), whose use of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to explore the  
42 creation of types in the archaeological record pushes us to think about categories as they were created  
43 in multiple times and places, not least in the contemporary archaeological endeavour.  
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47 Houses are increasingly viewed and analysed as a form of material culture; yet houses also differ from  
48 portable objects in that they serve as containers for action, offering opportunity and constraint (Lucas  
49 2016). This ambiguity of scale has meant that houses exist across extremely varied traditions of  
50 archaeological enquiry. Many fruitful recent approaches have embraced that duality, exploring how  
51 houses both reflect and affect daily life; almost universally these have involved an exploration of the  
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55 <sup>1</sup> Senior Lecturer, Department of Archaeology, University of York; Core Group member Centre for Urban Network  
56 Evolutions, Aarhus University; and Honorary Research Fellow, University of South Africa (UNISA)  
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3 ways that people understood and used space within the house (Allison 2004; Johnson 2010; Gilchrist  
4 1994). Those that explicitly reference assemblage theory have also tended to explore the materiality of  
5 the house, drawing on the materials of construction and their own agency – for example the use of  
6 building materials that need constant renovation, which require a cycle of activity from the inhabitants  
7 (Lucas 2016).  
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10 In my own work, I have explored one of the quintessential house types for exploring the materiality of  
11 space: the Swahili stone house of the eastern African coast. Donley-Reid's (1990) work on the  
12 contemporary Swahili house as a structuring structure was a compelling study that invoked a world of  
13 action. Her analysis moved between archaeology and ethnography, building on contemporary uses and  
14 understandings of space to build a model of the Swahili stone house as both a reflection of social  
15 structures and an active force in shaping them. What emerged powerfully was the importance of the  
16 house in structuring relations and claims to patrician identity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although this  
17 reflects many of the socio-political and economic pressures of the time (Fleisher 2015), it is striking that  
18 the house was an important category for inscribing and displaying identity. Contemporary Swahili made  
19 strong claims to historicity for these meanings; the past was for them a key part of how the category  
20 was defined.  
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24 I use the word 'category' rather than type very deliberately, following Van Oyen's (2015) deconstruction  
25 of archaeological types as *categories* defined in particular places and times. Stone houses first appeared  
26 on the eastern African coast in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. They contained subdivisions that in many cases might  
27 be thought of as similar to the ideal layout recorded by Donley-Reid, but in other instances were very  
28 different. These stone houses were themselves a development of a wattle and daub architectural  
29 tradition, and some early 'stone' houses were built of coral in a daub matrix (Horton 1996); they were  
30 probably always in a minority in townscapes dominated by wattle and daub architecture. Building in  
31 coral represented a new medium, previously employed for mosques and tombs, and involving a  
32 particular engagement with the marine environment (Fleisher n.d.). The materials ushered in a new  
33 temporality of occupation, with greater longevity in the townscape but the need for regular  
34 maintenance. They also seem to have brought with them some different ways of occupying space;  
35 household excavations at Songo Mnara, for example, have shown that domestic activities in wattle and  
36 daub houses tended to occur outside the doors in public spaces, while in the stone houses they were  
37 contained, moved into interiors and walled courtyards (Wynne-Jones 2013). They were settings for craft  
38 activities of particular kinds and were probably also important settings for claims to place: structured  
39 deposits in the foundations suggest significant investment in their foundation (Wynne-Jones and  
40 Fleisher 2016). Stone houses as a category, then, were not instances of an ideal type, but coalesced  
41 through a combination of materials and practices. These would have cross-referred, and the category is  
42 multi-scalar in that they existed as part of a regional tradition and a broader world of building using  
43 coral, and of merchant housing (Um 2009).  
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49 During the centuries after the arrival of the Portuguese, from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, data are scarce for  
50 stone houses (as for all parts of Swahili culture). The houses, and the towns of which they were part,  
51 seem often to have been abandoned. Yet the category persisted, and during the period of Omani  
52 domination it was re-formed with new spatial logics and social structures (Bissell 2018), but with a  
53 similar ontological role. The historical tradition of living in stone on the Swahili coast contributed to this  
54 later category, as did social practices derived from Omani courtyard houses (although see Nagy 1998).  
55 This period was also one in which new ways of defining civilised behaviour were being created, along  
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3 with shifts in the ways status was defined as a group rather than an individual characteristic, linked to  
4 purity and piety (Iliffe 2005: 34-5). These shifts in social identities were played out in the category of the  
5 stone house, which also became the setting for new (secluded) social roles for women.  
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8 In the twentieth century, the stone house category became important in the definition of a new form of  
9 culture again, among archaeologists working to explore Swahili civilisation. Qualities of the stone house  
10 that had previously been important markers of social status, such as the permanence in the townscape,  
11 now became crucial to the archaeological process due to their relative preservation. The category of the  
12 stone house was defined again by researchers, for whom the materials of construction became both  
13 practically and conceptually important as a defining type shared along the coast (Allen 1979). As with  
14 each of these moments in the categorisation of the stone house, history was important. In this case the  
15 Omani period overshadowed earlier phases, and it is now our task to reconstruct exactly how stone  
16 houses were a category in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Although some practices were different, there were also  
17 numerous similarities between the ways that people occupied wattle and daub houses and those of  
18 coral; some of the ways of inhabiting the stone house may have developed only gradually, shaped by the  
19 spaces themselves and the opportunities they afforded.  
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23 There is not the space here for a full discussion of this trajectory, and this is necessarily brief. My aim is  
24 to provide a comparative example of the ways a house type became a category at different historical  
25 moments. In this I follow Van Oyen in her use of ANT-inspired concepts, yet this exploration of the  
26 trajectory of a category chimes with the aims of assemblage theory. In exploring an archaeological type,  
27 Van Oyen (2015: 74) suggests that ANT's notion of stabilisation is crucial; exploring how and when  
28 categories stabilised, rather than focussing on processes of becoming (although cf. Fowler and Harris  
29 2015). Beck's article moves us towards analysis of the trajectory of the Trelleborg house category, yet  
30 the moments of stabilisation would have been interesting aspects for discussion. At what moments and  
31 how did the category coalesce (assemble?) and what were the engagements, material, practical and  
32 academic, that caused that categorical stability? Elsewhere, Beck has published a biography of a  
33 Trelleborg house (cited in text); to reassess the type itself it would be valuable to think through a  
34 biography of the Trelleborg category as understood by inhabitants, contemporaries, and archaeologists  
35 themselves.  
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