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The architect's signature: The social production of a residential landscape at Monte Viudo, Chachapoyas, Peru



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ABSTRACT

The Chachapoyas region of northern Peru was home to one of the most elaborate, but little studied, traditions of residential architecture in the prehispanic Andes. This paper examines the ways in which individual and group decision-making, social and political circumstances, and physical environments articulated to shape the material features of circular stone houses at the settlement site of Monte Viudo. In particular, it emphasizes the process of house construction and the role of human agency. Data is based on excavation of seven residential buildings, combined with mapping and recording of features of all structures at Monte Viudo. Taking advantage of the site's excellent preservation, special attention is paid to the material attributes of residential buildings as a source of information complementary to spatial organization.

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Introduction

In recent decades, archaeology has experienced a renewed proliferation of interest in the relationship between societies and their built environments, especially as scholars focus on the role of materiality in the social production of space. Many works explore variables such as power, identity, agency, memory, landscape, and so on, most frequently in the context of monumental public architecture (e.g. Moore, 1996a, Bradley, 1998; Kowalski, 1999; Pauketat, 2000; Alcock, 2002; Smith, 2003; Van Dyke, 2008, *inter alia*). Such studies are especially successful in capturing the creation of built environments as a contingent, historically specific process resulting from the interplay between agentive individuals, socio-political structures, and the material and spatial attributes of built spaces.

The study of house architecture possesses an equally rich and much longer history in both archaeology and anthropology alike, and the pivotal role that houses play in social, political, and ideological dynamics has been recognized since the early and influential works of Lewis Henry Morgan (1965[1881]) and Marcel Mauss (Mauss and Beauchat, 1979). This paper joins a small but growing body of archaeological studies that examine how the social production of space—as a dialogue between actors, social landscapes, and material objects—unfolds in the specific context of residential architecture (e.g. Pauketat and Alt, 2005; van Gijsegem, 2001; Fleisher and LaViolette, 2007; Hutson, 2010; Carmean

et al., 2011; Kosiba and Bauer, 2013; Love, 2013). The unique and ideologically rich dimensions of house spaces not only offer an especially potent context in which to examine this process, but also promise to illuminate our understanding of public and monumental settings in turn.

The unusual characteristics and excellent preservation of houses in the Chachapoyas region of Peru's northern highlands present a valuable opportunity to pursue these issues. The groups who lived here in the late prehispanic period developed a tradition of residential architecture that entailed technical innovation, extensive inputs of labor and material resources, and highly developed aesthetic canons (Fig. 1) (Schjellerup, 1997; Church and von Hagen, 2008). Many of these buildings have been protected by the cover of dense cloud forest (*ceja de selva*) environments, their walls still preserved to heights of four meters or more, permitting detailed examination of spatial and material features alike. Furthermore, many Chachapoya sites are characterized by a puzzling triad of characteristics that challenge traditionally held assumptions about the relationship between residential and public architecture: residential buildings—even those of non-elites—were highly elaborate, while communal architecture was rarely monumental in scale, and, moreover, the same architectural forms were used for both residences and ritual structures.

This paper attempts to reconstruct how residents of a Chachapoya village of northeastern Peru in the early second millennium AD shaped the built environment that they inhabited on a daily basis. I foreground the reflective and active aspects of house creation, examining how individuals who were part of a

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Fig. 1. Structure 199 at Monte Viudo.

specific socio-political landscape made decisions about the material features and look of residences. In particular, this paper focuses on status and investigates how it was negotiated through the material culture of residential architecture, thus joining a number of scholars who recognize the construction and use of domestic buildings as an arena of political practice (Bowser and Patton, 2004; Lyons, 1996, 2007; Kohn, 2010; Wynne-Jones, 2013). These questions are addressed by qualitatively and quantitatively comparing the spatial and material features of residential buildings across the settlement site of Monte Viudo. Data derive from investigations directed by the author at the site of Monte Viudo during 2011–2012 for the “Proyecto Arqueológico Pueblo Chachapoya” research project (Guengerich, 2012).

The creation of residential architecture

Scholars, architects, and thinkers from Bourdieu to Winston Churchill have recognized the dialectical nature of the relationship between humans and their built environments—that is, “we make our buildings and then our buildings make us.” This idea has frequently been voiced in contemporary anthropology and archaeology, especially in studies of domestic contexts that incorporate insights from practice or structuration theory (e.g. Pader, 1988; Robben, 1989; Donley-Reid, 1990). I argue, however, that in recent scholarship of residential architecture, the second element of this process has predominated over the first, especially given the influence of phenomenological studies of the lived environment (e.g. Tilley, 1994; Van Dyke, 2008) and of relational models of human-object interactions that locate greater agency in non-human objects than was previously recognized (e.g. Hendon, 2010; Hutson, 2010; Olsen, 2010).

To be sure, neither the construction nor the use and inhabitation of architecture can be studied in isolation. But this paper is intended to demonstrate that archaeologists’ interpretations of residential architecture would benefit by looking beyond their final form to incorporate a richer consideration of the material actions, concrete contexts, and human subjects that participated in its production. I do not suggest that the creation process of houses is more important than the subsequent process by which they shape the subjectivity of their inhabitants; but I suggest that it is *equally* important, and that it has not yet been accorded sufficient explanatory weight. To date, the construction process itself has constituted the subject of little archaeological research on residential architecture (although see Cameron, 1998; Pauketat and Alt 2005; Carmean et al., 2011; Love, 2013), even as it is often treated as a principal analytic for the interpretation of monumental architecture (e.g. Trigger, 1990).

Over time, most scholarship of residential architecture has explained its creation by identifying underlying structural or social determinants of house form. Within the functionalist frameworks of 1970s–80s household studies and especially household archaeology, houses’ significance was located in the *household*, a minimal social-material unit whose function was seen to be primarily economic and adapted to the environmental or social setting (e.g. Wilk and Rathje, 1982; Ashmore and Wilk, 1988). Around the same time, houses emerged as a prominent subject in ethnographic research, with scholars examining architectural symbolism and semiotics, and in particular the capacity of houses to order society and the cosmos (e.g. Bourdieu, 1973; Glassie, 1975; Hugh-Jones, 1979; Blier, 1987 *inter alia*). These works, often structuralist in their approach, locate the main determinants of house form at a deep cultural level rather than in proximal factors that influence particular iterations. In archaeology, ethnicity has been another prominent explanation of house form and spatial organization (e.g. Aldenderfer and Stanish, 1993; Faust and Bunimowitz, 2003; Van Gijsegem and Vaughn, 2008). In recent years, one of the most influential frameworks for interpreting the creation of residential architecture, especially in terms of spatial attributes, is Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (1977) and related concepts of structuration (Giddens, 1984) (e.g. Pader, 1988; Robben, 1989; Yate, 1989; Donley-Reid, 1990).

All of these factors may be at play in the creation of residential architecture and need not be perceived as mutually exclusive. But I propose that these broad interpretive models are complemented and enriched by simultaneously recognizing the process of house creation as a concrete set of actions carried out by agentive subjects with a distinct array of limitations and resources. How and why did reflective builders with variable degrees of knowledge make decisions about the material features of residences, and how did they attempt to achieve these ends using the resources available to them in particular environmental and social circumstances? Of course, not all factors influencing house form are consciously conceived or perfectly understood in the minds of builders, but I contend that it is nevertheless important to not only identify the outcomes of human actions, but also to elucidate, as far as possible, the factors that led agents in a particular social and cultural context to undertake them (cf. Cowgill, 2000; Hegmon and Kulow, 2005). Moreover, the likelihood that builders will invest a substantial degree of reflection into their architectural decisions is indicated by the fact that house construction may an extremely costly investment, and one that happens relatively rarely in a lifetime (Blanton, 1994, p. 16, Carter and Collins Crumley, 2005, pp. 14–15). Therefore, even if the end result of the creation process is a building that identically reproduces existing house forms—reflecting shared class, ethnicity, cosmology, etc.—its construction still must be explained as an assembly of individuals who came to this event with different backgrounds, knowledge, or aims originating from their unique subject position.

The changes in how scholars of vernacular architecture have approached the concept of “tradition” are helpful for understanding how and why individuals reproduce familiar canons of residential architecture, with or without major or minor changes. This body of literature has the advantage of studying contemporary contexts, which enables researchers to interact with informants who can shed light on the design process. In the past, “tradition” was frequently used to denote forms and building practices transmitted generationally, and for the most part, scholars did not problematize how or why this transmission occurs or how traditions change over time (e.g. Rudofsky, 1965; Upton, 1993; Asquith and Vellinga, 2006). In contrast, contemporary scholars of vernacular architecture have invested a good deal of effort in working through issues of agency, structure, and design in their understandings of tradition.

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