This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

Gottfried Semper
In Search of Architecture

© 1984 MIT

License Terms:

Made available under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public
License
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

OA Funding Provided By:

National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon
Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

doi:10.7551/mitpress/3331.001.0001

2

The Basic Elements of Architecture*

[*The Dwelling the First Form of Man's Building Activity*]

First Chapter. Introduction.

Any discourse should first go back to the simple origin of the subject under review, trace its gradual development, and explain exceptions and variations by comparing them with the original state. For this reason, it hardly needs justification that the present study, which tries to arrange into groups, families, and classes all that architecture has created, opens with the dwelling or private house as the original and simplest type.

Yet there may be some reason to doubt whether architecture as such really started with the building of dwellings. Art history shows that nations with a more pronounced artistic inclination singled out public buildings, especially temples, by embellishing them; whereas the life of the individual and consequently the private house took on artistic refinement only when religious and political decline had set in, and with it a retreat from public life and a compensating pleasure in a life of splendor and luxury.

Therefore—I hear people assert—the buildings of public worship ought to be dealt with first; they are supposed to be the first and only cause for the rise of *true*, national, and *fine* art, and without piety this could not have happened.

No doubt true art without piety does not exist: piety causes man to take delight in the living beings that the Maker has created; it drives him, enraptured, to express himself creatively and like a deity in his own work.

*Introduction to "Comparative Building Theory" ("Vergleichende Baulehre," 1850): MS 58, fols. 15–30.

But this artistic piety is pantheistic and turns everything it embraces into temples of an all-pervading deity. Although it finds its fullest embodiment only in the sacred temple building, it has been present in man right from the beginning: it was expressed in the first garland and in the first attempts at ornamentation.

The nations we first meet in history were religiously and politically well organized. Yet before they reached this comparatively high degree of civilization they had had to travel a long road—which might have been only an attempt on their part to regain a height they had lost in even earlier times. [fols. 15–16]

For instance, it is improbable that the frugal private life of the Greeks was the one they had led from the beginning, just as it would be wrong to conclude from the severe simplicity of the Doric style that even plainer forms had preceded it. On the contrary, unless we are greatly mistaken, the heroic and the political-historical times were preceded by a period of comfortable living and private luxury.

In those times, according to legend (and confirmed by fairly safe indications), great care was taken with the palaces and domestic houses, whereas public life gave art no opportunity; moreover, temples, as we understand them, did not exist.

The temple has evolved from the funeral cult; tombs being the houses of the dead, the temple is the refined and idealized form of the same motif that underlies the development of human dwellings.

For that reason, the sequence chosen here is justified, the more so since it cannot be denied that, even if not architecture, then certainly building—in other words, joining material into a well-planned form—was first at work on dwellings and tombs.

Because of the great number of relevant subjects, this section will be longer than all the remaining sections put together; it is also the most important one because it introduces in their original forms those elements whose development will be the subject of the sections that follow.

The beginning being so important, it is necessary both to make more general preliminary remarks and to go into many details, even though much may seem to lie outside the plan and framework of this book.

The thoroughness here will allow the remaining sections to be much shorter and to rely on references back to this section.

Because of the comprehensive plan of this work it is not possible to do more than touch upon the important geographical, moral, political, and religious interrelations between nations and the changes that have occurred over the centuries. The author's intention is to put

the reader into a frame of mind that will make the works of these nations understandable to him. [fols. 16–18]

[*The Hearth and Its Symbolic Significance*]

Second Chapter. The Hearth. *

Before men thought of erecting tents, fences, or huts, they gathered around the open flame, which kept them warm and dry and where they prepared their simple meals. The hearth is the germ, the embryo, of all social institutions. The first sign of gathering, of settlement and rest after long wanderings and the hardship of the chase, is still the set of the fire and the lighting of the crackling flame. From early times on, the hearth became a place of worship; very old and long-lasting religious ideas and forms were associated with it. It was a moral symbol: it joined men together into families, tribes, and nations, and it contributed to the rise of social institutions at least as much as want and simple need. The house altar was the first object to be singled out for adornment; throughout all periods of human society it formed the sacred focus around which the other separate elements were crystallized into a whole.

The hearth has kept its age-old significance up to the present. In every room the center of family life today is still the fireplace.

Sharing the meals at the domestic hearth was a mark of being a member of the community. In Greek and Latin the words "koine" and "caena" took on the meaning of social associations; the German "Genossenschaft" [association] is derived from "geniessen" [to savor food].

But the significance of the hearth was even greater in antiquity: it was the sacred place for solemn worship. The ancestors' grave was close to the hearth. This is still the custom with the Indians of Colombia. Some, for instance the Salives, place the tombs of their chiefs in the center of their huts; other tribes dry the corpses over the fire and suspend them from the beams of the roof.†

Who can doubt that the Egyptian practice of embalming the dead and of displaying the mummies at festive meals, and the Roman lectisternia with their waxen ancestral portraits, originated from equally

---

*Vitruvius 2, p. 1.
†Millin, *Voyage en Colombie*. Hüllmann, *Urgeschichte des Staats*. [Karl Dietrich Hüll-mann, *Urgeschichte des Staats* (Königsberg, 1817), especially pp. 113ff, 120. The book on Colombia has not been identified so far.]

coarse ancestral customs? It was therefore the ancestors who had first satisfied the urge to relate one's own devout emotions to a real object. Altar and hearth became kindred notions and the mask of the deceased the first idol.

When tribes intermarried and concluded alliances, the chiefs of the families that were related by marriage came together at the hearth of the patriarch who had arranged the meeting. On these occasions the two families would jointly venerate their ancestors and offer them libations — the origin of polytheism.

Thus the hearth, identified with the ancestral tomb, became the core and center of the temples in the form of the sacrificial altar.

The palace of the chief became the memnonium, that is, the royal court, and the tomb became the temple and seat of government. [fols. 18–20]

[*Protection of the Hearth. The Four Elements of Architecture: Hearth, Roof, Mound, and Fence. The Two Basic Forms of Dwelling.*]

Third Chapter. First Elements of the Domestic House.

Protection of the hearth. There is no need to prove in detail that the protection of the hearth against the rigors of the weather as well as against attacks by wild animals and hostile men was the primary reason for setting apart some space from the surrounding world.

What made this separation necessary differed, however, according to different circumstances.

In regions with a mild climate and in the plain, where people could live in the open air for most of the time, a light tentlike cover against the weather was needed.

While this sort of protection against the weather was easily achieved, making the settlement secure against the vehemence of the elements was more difficult. Mounds had to be built to protect the hearth against inundation by the nearby river.

But enemies too had to be kept away from the hearth; the much-coveted fields in the plain attracted the envy and rapacity of man, while the herds were exposed to attacks by wild animals.

Enclosures, fences, and walls were needed to protect the hearth, and mounds were needed to make it safe from flooding and also to espy the enemy from afar.

Thus, four elements of primitive building arose out of the most immediate needs: the roof, the mound, the enclosure and, as spiritual center of the whole, the social hearth.

In rocky regions the many caves offered a natural though rough protection against the climate. Natural grottoes could easily provide everything else that was needed for a safe dwelling. One can therefore assume that when men began to live together in very early times, grottoes were used. Yet one may rightly doubt that these tribes, content with having some protection, and living in such cavernous but small region that they never became numerous or powerful, could greatly influence the development of mankind. The shapeless form of the grottoes surrounding these people from the first day of their lives must have had a lasting effect on them, which would have made them grow up into men engrossed in fantastic visions rather than devoted to the well-ordered world of architecture.

Therefore, we believe we are fully justified in not admitting the grotto as a motif of consequence to architecture and in disregarding it completely when inquiring into the origin of architecture; we shall try to substantiate this course when the occasion presents itself. [fols. 21–22]

Living conditions of another kind also induced men to join and live together in dwellings. The hunting inhabitants of mountainous, wooded regions felt themselves amply protected against the elements as well as against enemies by the nature of their country, their poverty, and their self-assured strength. The thinly scattered population held the fields and produce of the land as common property and let everyone freely use it. They needed neither walls nor dikes. Only the climate was a powerful enemy; a solid, warm roof was needed for protection against it. Originally this roof rose directly from the ground; only later, when combined with the protective wall, did it take on the form of a house.

There are many indications that the earliest inhabitants of Latium did not know the Etruscan-Greek way of building that the Romans, their descendants, were to adopt. The earliest form of their dwellings are known to have been simple roofed-in huts, some of which were still standing in late Roman times. Further evidence is provided by strange clay urns in the form of huts, found under a volcanic layer near Albano. The volcanic activity in Latium reaches back far beyond historical records and even beyond traditions and legend. How ancient the people of this country must have been! The vignette at the end of this chapter shows a picture of these clay models after Mazois [cf. figure 23].

Life in these huts was comfortable and friendly, the opposite of life outside with its toil and combat. The hut became a small secluded

world on its own; the family, including the cattle, were part of it. A roof protected it all.

These huts stood next to each other, but loosely grouped, in the primordial landscape.

We can thus distinguish between two basically different ways in which human dwellings arose. First, the courtyard with its surrounding walls and, within, some open sheds of minor importance, and second, the hut, the freestanding house in its narrower sense.

In the first arrangement the enclosure, which later became the wall, dominated all other elements of the building, whereas in the second, the roof was the predominant element. [fols. 23–24]

[*Development of Social Organizations: Hierarchy and Autocracy*]

Fourth Chapter. Continuation.

In the preceding chapter we have shown how the first domestic settlements evolved out of the earliest stage of social life, the family. For this process we assumed only motives of a material nature, arising from the need for shelter.

These settlements could retain their simplicity when the first states, through agreements between chiefs, were organized into federations, which modeled their civil institutions after similar constitutions based on rule by kinship.

These first federal constitutions developed everywhere into hierarchic or autocratic constitutions. The most ancient history recounts numerous cases that prove this, although the circumstances that brought about these changes are seldom indicated.

A priesthood might formally retain the old federal constitution, except that priests belonging to a favored family now dominated the federation. They were privileged to attend to the chief religious services and, in consequence, took on the permanent supreme direction of all affairs of state, a prerogative emanating from the priesthood's ancestral hearth. Examples of hierarchic rule were the Amphictonic League (the union of the original Hellenic tribes around the common hearth at Delphi), the covenant of the Twelve Tribes of Israel around the arc of the Levites, and the Egyptian league of the Twelve Kingdoms; the latter, however, was not grafted onto the original federal alliance of free tribes but followed after an intermediate stage during which the tribes became dominated by autocratic rule from which the hierarchic federal state then arose.*

---

*Herod[otus] 2, pp. 99, 147, 151, 159.

Except where an autocracy had paved the way for a state dominated by priests, the hierarchic constitution was not much different in form from the original federal constitution; therefore, the basic features of domestic institutions were hardly affected by it.

The autocratic constitution might in a few cases have been introduced through agreements between members of a tribe. But in most cases it was the result of wanderings and expeditions into foreign lands, which overpopulation or other reasons had forced the members of a federation to undertake. [fols 27–28]

The bond created by these common ventures was to a certain extent the opposite of the original and natural bond between families of the same tribe. Men joined together not from kinship but from love of adventure; youth, courage, and strength, perhaps also poverty and debts, made them eager or willing to take part in daring and dangerous expeditions. They were led by a commander either freely chosen or elevated to that position by force of circumstances, family prestige, or personal capability. Thus, out of these expeditions arose the arbitrarily ruled military state.

Unlike the primeval form of society based on ownership of property and individual independence, the military state followed socialist ideas; it demanded that the individual merge into the whole, the ideal expression of which was the state as personified in its ruler.

All Asiatic states, from their earliest history to the most recent times, had a socialist base. Property ownership was replaced by military feudalism, of which the supreme head, as the visible representative of an ideal notion, the state, ruled over all the material and moral means of the state. He had power over life and death. All possessions derived from him and all reverted to him as soon as he demanded them or when the owner died.

In his report on the excavations at Chorsabad Monsieur Botta has shown by a striking example that these principles are still valid in the Orient: "Dans les pays des musulmans il n'a pas de propriété veritable, mais un simple droit de possessions, payé chaque année par un redevance à un être idéale nommé imâm, représentant de la communauté musulmane et représenté lui même par le gouvernement. Celui-ci, n'étant en quelque sorte qu'un tuteur, dispose du sol dans l'intérêt de la société qu'il personifie, mais il ne peut l'aliéner pas une vente à perpétuité."[1]

Only powerful and well-organized societies could succeed in making the route through the desert safe for trade. They alone had forced labor and slaves at their disposal; they alone could in this way master the elements, claim the muddy soil from the river, and sow on it that

which would bring them unheard-of riches and enable them to build sky-high monuments and towns stretching across the land.

Wealth and ease, however, cut the lifeline of a state whose whole existence depended on war. Peace was bound to lead to stagnation and a pause in social development that would last for many centuries until revolutions occurred, brought about not from within but by outside forces.

What then followed was not an improved and more progressive form of the preceding phase; it was another example of the same kind, which devours its father and, once its destiny is fulfilled, itself falls prey to its successor.

The oldest Asiatic people whose monuments still stand or are known to us through literary sources were joined into states in a similar way. We shall deal first with their monuments, those amazing witnesses to their power and wealth; not only because they are the oldest but also because their influence on the people living on the northern shore of the Mediterranean, on those highly organized countries where civil liberty brought with it the free unfolding of the arts, has recently been recognized.

Our first task, therefore, will be to show what influence the warlike socialist conditions of society had on the formation of domestic establishments. [fols. 28–30]