Bhutanese Architecture and the dynamics of tradition: an architectural study of identity and change in traditional dwelling culture and built environment

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Abstract

What significance architecture could possibly have, what role it could play and what form it could take are questions that can no longer be satisfactorily addressed within the limitations of the research field of architectural history and theory. The research question “What can architecture potentially be?” is a fundamental problem of architectural theory. Whenever the potential dimension of architecture as medium of communication is at stake, architecture should be approached as a 'cultural' practice. One of the premises of the present study is the exploration of methods and tools to conceive of the potential role of architecture as shaping, deconstructing, mediating and generating a tangled web of human identities, -individual and collective-, within a well defined but dynamic spatio-cultural context. The underlying hypothesis is that if culture-specific concepts of ordered space and built form can be studied as a force rather than as a stable entity, the potentiality of architecture will be better understood. Given the fact that every spatio-cultural constellation is a dynamic entity that is continually in motion (from generation over disintegration to revitalization), there is a need to introduce the issue of change.

To study the issue of change from an architectural point of view, the conceptual framework is represented by the tension field of tradition and modernity. One of the objectives of the present dissertation is to add something to these debate on tradition and modernity by exploring one of the tension field’s polar ends, -tradition-, in relation to a number of faculties that are usually associated with its implied opposite, modernity. The cultural matrix investigated in this dissertation is Bhutan, one of the world's most secluded, hitherto well-preserved and uncharted 'living' architectural traditions. Bhutan is a small independent Himalayan Buddhist kingdom where one can still observe a blend of centuries-old (rural) architectural traditions, and the first attempts to introduce and structure urban space as the materialization of a ‘modern’ (urban) condition. How can, -in the light of the research question and the proposed conceptual framework-, a detailed study of Bhutan’s traditional
dwelling culture contribute to a more dynamic definition of tradition? Leaving aside the fact that in Bhutan the tension field of tradition and modernity is embodied by distinct architectural figures of village and city respectively, the real fascination for Bhutan as contextual framework comes forth from the observation that some of the faculties that are associated with the ‘transitory’ concept of modernity are more likely to be found in Bhutan’s traditional condition than in its imported version of built space. Indeed, in Bhutan there is presumptive evidence that factors such as change, impermanence, ambiguity, tolerance, deconstruction and reconstruction are celebrated as exponents of Bhutanese traditionality. This process of negotiation is facilitated by the fact that Bhutanese tradition is not a fossilized body of habits and conventions, but is rather based on an outlook that permits and even stimulates change. This dynamic feature of Bhutanese tradition is particularly obvious in its building and dwelling culture, which presents us with remarkable evidence of the intimate relation between culture and architecture. That is why Bhutanese traditional building and dwelling culture is the focus of the dissertation. Since my main research question focuses on the interrelation between architecture and culture, I heavily rely upon the methods and concepts developed within architectural anthropology aiming to contribute to the emerging field of scientific research. For being interested in architectural anthropology as a discipline that studies the interrelationship between culture and architecture, I found in Bhutan an immensely rich field of study.

The issue of change in tradition is explored in this dissertation by means of two strategies:

1. a static reading providing a structural analysis of dwelling culture (material culture); and

2. a dynamic reading focusing on the dweller’s practices (praxiology), on how the dweller deals with its tradition, heritage and how these practices mediate architectural transformations and dynamic changes in culture.

Both strategies are interwoven in the case studies focusing on the three most relevant concepts of ordered space and built form: 1. the Buddhist receptacle for offerings (chörten), 2. the monastery-fortress (dzong), and 3. the clustered village settlement.
Written by an architect, it is based upon extensive fieldwork in Bhutan, which focused first of all on a meticulous documentation of building and dwelling practices, as well as of some religious rituals related to building. In this approach a detailed synchronic architectural record was complemented by a diachronic follow-up, documenting the changes over time that occurred to specific sites and buildings. The results of this research are presented in two different media: graphics and text. This means that the detailed graphical analyses collected in volume 2 and the annexed folder are not just illustrations accompanying the text, but are to be considered an integral part of the dissertation. They provide the documentary basis that supports the present interpretation of Bhutan’s dwelling culture, but their value extends beyond that. For it is the intention of the author that the collected material can also serve a more general purpose: it can be consulted by other researchers – Tibetologists, anthropologists, historians, sociologists - to answer research questions stemming from other interests and perspectives.