

# The Archive and the Field

## Ethnographic Research in Architectural Theory

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### I. “Criticism” versus “Research”

Architectural theory is today largely congruent with architectural historiography and draws its raw material from this history when it brings itself to theoretical trains of thought. One can explain this primacy of the historical in the formation of theory in architecture since the early 1960s with reference to both theoretical reasons and reasons to do with how architectural history is written. In addition to the general significance of a Marxist philosophy of history, it is the relevance of a novel memorial conceptualism as exemplified by Aldo Rossi's *L'architettura della città* (1966). In Manfredo Tafuri these two currents were reflected in their interdependency and raised to a new theoretical level. In his preface to *Progetto e utopia* (1973), Tafuri speaks of the “examination of the history of modern architecture with the methodological instruments of a strictly Marxist critique of ideology”<sup>1</sup>, with which he sought to draw attention to the crossover of the theory of history and the history of architecture. Tafuri, it is known, regarded synchronous analysis as being second-rank to historical analysis, as H el ene Lipstadt and Harvey Mendelsohn have pointed out.<sup>2</sup>

Concurrent with the comprehensive appreciation of the historical, comparative and empirical approaches had also been tested in the new field of architectural theory, without, however, ever properly entering into the repertoire of architectural theory. As late as 1980, the German architectural historian Jan Pieper spoke of an “anthropological approach to architectural theory.”<sup>3</sup> In the late 1960s he was part of an informal network of architects who had been conducting research in different countries in Asia. In his essay “An outline of architectural anthropology in relation to the general history and theory of architecture” he addresses the then-novel architecture-anthropological research and the still completely unresolved relations to the project of a theory and history of architecture. Reading his essay today, it is remarkable that he puts architectural anthropology in an explicit, informatory relation to

1 Tafuri 1977 (1973).

2 “Structuralism, while useful for its scientificity, is, for the critic, inferior to historicity.” Lipstadt/Mendelsohn 1993: 64.

3 Pieper 1980: 4.

4 Ibid. 4.

5 Ibid. 4.

6 Ibid. 5.

7 Ibid. 5.

8 Ibid. 5.

9 “Tafuri accused his critics, Zevi and Portuguese, as performing ‘operative’ (or instrumental) architectural criticism, i.e., using their agendas as practicing architects to frame the history of architecture, anathema to his own ‘critical’ position. He instead suggested that architectural criticism and history should be considered the same thing, and that practicing architects abandon criticism. The controversy distilled to the means by which architectural historians could positively affect the work of architects.” <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/tafurim.htm> (Jan. 5, 2017)

10 This section is based on my book *Weltkonstruktion* (Roesler 2013).

11 Nitschke 1993: 7. As Gaudenz Domenig, one of the protagonists mentioned here, emphasized in a private correspondence, there was a loose network of architects with common interests, rather than an integrated group. “Wenn Nitschke schreibt ‘We met informally, occasionally, often accidentally’, so kann er nur meinen, dass er selbst die dort genannten Personen kannte und einzeln ab und zu getroffen hat, denn das war keine Gruppe, die je zusammenkommen wäre. Nur Günter kannte alle Aufgelisteten. Einige kannten wohl neben ihm auch noch zwei oder drei weitere aus der Liste, doch ein gemeinsames Treffen gab es sicher nie.” Private correspondence, December 18, 2016.

architectural theory. Pieper describes “architectural anthropology as the methodological counterpart to architectural history”.<sup>4</sup> “Historical understanding alone can never be the sole purpose of architectural research”; an insight not least indebted to the extra-European contexts where this research was conducted.<sup>5</sup> Pieper points, certainly referring to considerations by Manfredo Tafuri, to “the scholarly and the programmatic aspects of architectural theory”<sup>6</sup> and emphasises its fundamental ambivalence: “This dual aspect of architectural theory created some confusion as it fostered a frequent change in the plane of reflection; and this was not favourable to a substantial and methodologically convincing contribution to either part of the problem.”<sup>7</sup> Where architectural theory is (all too often indistinguishably) both programmatically and scholarly formulated—just think of *Learning from Las Vegas* of 1972—architectural anthropology has to react with a decided scholarly approach to the empirical research practice: “Architectural Anthropology does not speculate”<sup>8</sup>, as Pieper claims it in his essay.

Correspondingly, in Pieper’s writing, the figure of the *critic* is replaced by that of the *researcher*, who is not primarily concerned with a (critical) appraisal of European post-war modernism and its historical foundations, but rather—in light of the Indian, Nepalese and Japanese research-environments—has to develop heuristics which resemble those of the anthropologist. While with Tafuri, the function of architectural theory emerges from a self-understanding as historian-architect<sup>9</sup>, with the inclusion of architectural anthropological questions another option is added: the self-understanding as an anthropologist-architect. *Historiography* is methodologically supplemented by *ethnography*; Tafuri’s project of a *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* is expanded by Bernard Rudowsky’s programmatic display of an *Architecture without Architects*.

## II. Architectural Anthropology

The beginnings of an intellectual field of architectural anthropology in the present sense can be found in the first half of the 1960s;<sup>10</sup> in this period, architectural anthropology appears as a (cross-cultural) comparative research interest shared by a number of architects of different backgrounds. As Günter Nitschke later wrote:

“At that time few Western architects worked in India, Nepal and Japan, all struggling in their research to define a new anthropological field of human inquiry. The discourse in this field was initiated by, and centred around, the work of Niels Gutschow, Gerd Auer and Jan Pieper in India and Nepal; two Swiss researchers, Gaudenz Domenig and Nold Egenter; and two German researchers, Manfred Speidel and myself in Japan. An English architect, Chris Fawcett and a Canadian, Fred Thompson contributed to the same studies concerning Japan in their own way. We met informally, occasionally, often accidentally.”<sup>11</sup>

The beginnings of anthropological research in architecture can be described by the emergence of empirical or quasi-empirical investigations (Fig. 1). The focus of the interest of these young architects was the adequate description of what was seen on site. In the words of Manfred Speidel: “As a ‘student’ of Takamasa Yoshizaka, who was himself a student of Kon Wajiro, I did ‘field research’ all the time and everywhere.”<sup>12</sup> The research work in the villages and cities they visited did alternate with their participation in international architectural competitions. Since the end of the 1960s, the first research reports based on field-work (including extensive building surveys) and affiliated with research in the social sciences appeared (Fig. 2). The precise empirical study of the built environment and its use should provide a basis for contemporary architecture and city planning. Significant differences were found in the territorial, urban, as well as the constructional scales at which the respective studies operated.<sup>13</sup>

The particular feature of all these investigations was their dependency on an architectural epistemology, or to put another way, the cultivation of a researcher’s perspective *as an architect*. What Eduard F. Sekler stated in 1982 about the ethnographic working methods of Niels Gutschow could also be said about the other representatives of comparative architectural research at that time.

“Niels Gutschow has approached the exploration of his theme from the point of view of an architect for whom architecture and anthropology are inextricably linked and for which drawing as a means of working and expression remains irreplaceable. He thus stands in a venerable tradition that reaches back to men like Gottfried Semper and William Lethaby”.<sup>14</sup>

### III. Stoffwechsel as Diachronic Principle

Gottfried Semper, in particular, must be seen as a forerunner of the architectural-anthropological research of the twentieth century. While earlier systems

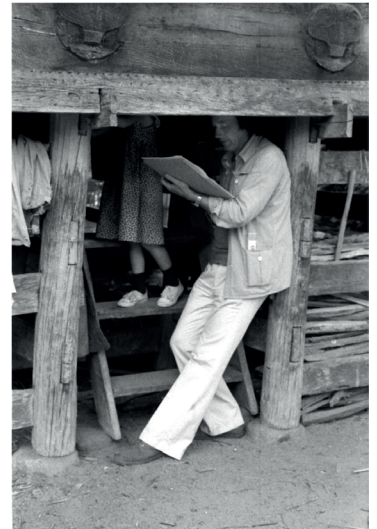


Fig. 1 Architect Gaudenz Domenig in the field, drawing a Toba Batak House. Lumban Binangan, Indonesia, 1979.

<sup>12</sup> Manfred Speidel, private communication, January 18, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> While the German architects devoted themselves in particular to investigations of urban scales, the Swiss architects mentioned show a greater interest in constructional-architectural questions and traditional building practices in religious contexts.

<sup>14</sup> Sekler 1982: 6.

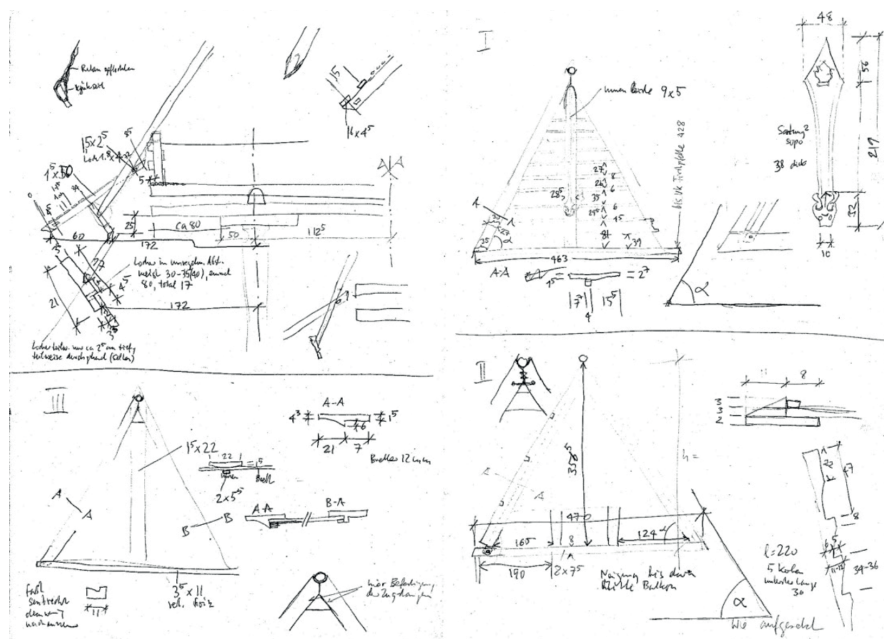


Fig. 2 Fieldnotes of Gaudenz Domenig, Indonesia, 1979.

15 On Semper's comparative building theory, see: Luttmann 2008.

16 Gottfried Semper, quoted in: Nerdinger, Winfried: Der Architekt Gottfried Semper "Der notwendige Zusammenhang der Gegenwart mit allen Jahrhunderten der Vergangenheit", in: Nerdinger/Oechslein 2003.

17 "When we consider the immense richness of nature and its great diversity, despite all its simplicity, should we not infer by analogy that it might be more or less the same with the creations of our hands, with our works of art? Like the works of nature, they are bound together by a few basic principles that find their simplest expression in certain original forms or types. From these few basic forms, an unlimited number of varieties have arisen and are still arising through evolution or fusion, depending on the specific requirements of their type, the gradual advances in invention, as well as the various influences and circumstances that were decisive in their development." Semper, Gottfried: Entwurf eines Systemes der vergleichenden Stillehre, 1853, in: Semper 1884: 261.

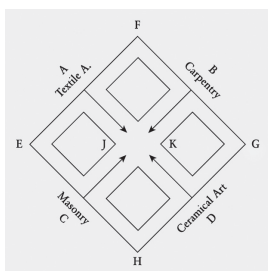


Fig. 3 Gottfried Semper: Diagram of a universal collection.

18 Roesler 2021 (2013).

19 Egenter 1987.

20 Semper, Gottfried: "Entwurf eines Systemes der vergleichenden Stillehre", 1853, in: Semper 1884: 261.

21 Semper 1860/1863: 7.

22 Ibid.

of architecture were idealised, deductive and decidedly Eurocentric, Semper's approach to craft and architecture intended to be more "empirical" and "comparative",<sup>15</sup> and therefore scientifically trained. Semper aimed at representing the architectural "connection between the present and all the centuries of the past".<sup>16</sup> His comparative system of constructed artefacts formed the basis of the evolutionary principle of "Stoffwechsel" (literally: (ex)change of material). Semper assumed four basic human industries from which all conceivable "varieties" of craftsmanship and artistic form could be derived.<sup>17</sup> On the basis of these four industries—textile art, ceramical art, carpentry and masonry—he developed a logic of *Stoffwechsel* with a museological intention (Fig. 3). According to Semper, the four constructive types are the same everywhere and therefore form the anthropological basis of "world construction".<sup>18</sup> As Nold Egenter noted in an unpublished 1987 lecture on "the work of Gottfried Semper and the application of his main thesis in recent architectural anthropological research", Semper's narrowing down of basic types of manual industries allows "very different things from different cultures to be juxtaposed and compared with each other in a surprising way" on the basis of categorical characteristics.<sup>19</sup> Analogous to a "comparative system of natural history"<sup>20</sup> Semper wanted to establish such a system for the arts; he spoke of a "comparative process that becomes necessary in this endeavour in order to group together those things that are related and to trace back what has been derived to what is original and simple".<sup>21</sup>

The core epistemological idea of Semper's universalist theory of *Stoffwechsel* was to make the transformability of materials equally dependent on the "matter" and the "ideas"; he rejected a purely material-technological understanding of applied arts and architecture. Technical and symbolic contents are (in principle) always transferred simultaneously and quite contradictory—which can only explain the enormous empirical wealth of artefacts and spatial developments worldwide. What Semper called *Stoffwechsel* referred to the transfer of material-specific methods of making to a new material and the technical and symbolic effects of this transposition. If buildings are understood as the outcome of *Stoffwechsel* phenomena, the attention is drawn to hierarchical divides: be it between domestic and non-domestic, low and high, foreign and indigenous or traditional and contemporary. In terms of their evolutionary history, buildings, and building types in general, reflect these hierarchies by expressing them as technical and symbolic distortions.

According to Semper, each material has an appropriate "manner of pictorial representation" and a "suitable technique of treatment" due to its unique "properties". The artistic treatment of a primary material means that the "original type", which Semper understood as the representation and technique of a material, is subject to a transformation. The "original type" receives "a certain colouring, as it were" through the modification; it is raised from a "primary" to the next, higher "stage of development". The "type" undergoes a "more or less pronounced metamorphosis".<sup>22</sup> With each metamorphosis that takes place, the technical-symbolic order of the preceding motif is inscribed in the han-



dling of the subsequent materials and becomes embedded in the material as a kind of memory. It is essential that in the “composite results”, despite numerous metamorphoses, the “archetype and all stages of its transformation” continue to be evident—“expressed”, as Semper says. In forms, the original type remains recognisable—albeit more or less distorted—by means of thematic reminiscences and survivals. Think of a wall in building where the textile prototype, the garment, can still be recognised as such.

In unfolding “*Stoffwechsel* in the arts”, Semper was concerned with “its law of succession”.<sup>23</sup> However, Semper wavered as to whether *Stoffwechsel* should be thought of as a directional tendency or rather as an open-ended metamorphosis; Semper’s theoretical considerations show a certain indecision, that stems from the dual character of his “types”, bound to material and form. Semper’s theory of *Stoffwechsel* contains two dimensions that cannot easily be reconciled: it is both empirically grounded transformation and a normative principle of proper development. *Stoffwechsel* follows the creative development in craftsmanship and architecture—but it also determines it. In contrast to a documentary historiography, architectural theory, according to Semper, cannot refrain from looking towards a systematic view of its own evolutionary potential. It is an intellectual endeavour that aims to anticipate the future. With the guiding premise that materiality and form, scientific laws and design rules cannot be reduced to one another, Semper laid the epistemological foundation for architectural anthropological research, which would only take on recognizable contours in the second half of the twentieth century.

#### IV. Fieldwork and Theoretical Reasoning

The territories of architectural anthropological research in the 1960s and 1970s were still characterised by a high degree of architectural diversity. Over the centuries, groups of people developed specific architectural solutions that distinguish them from neighbouring groups and indicate their ethnic affiliation. The lived experience and physical presence of the observer on site, examining these localized peculiarities, is a central feature of field research. It relies on techniques of data production and analysis that are based on the body of the observer. It invokes the idea of data-gathering as part of a process of discovery, personal experience, and notetaking that require further processes of absorbing the data afterwards in analytical and writing processes. The practice of fieldwork is a paradox of scientific act versus the subjectivity of embodied knowledge, where research in history and theory of architecture may probe the boundaries of what is considered acceptable as knowledge production in the service of architectural discourse.<sup>24</sup>

In her book *Architecture in Northern Ghana* (1969) Labelle Prussin reports (based on her fieldwork) from six villages of six different ethnic groups in northern Ghana: from Kasuliyili, a Dagomba village; from Yankezia, a Concomba hamlet; from Tongo, a settlement of Tallensi (Fig. 4); from Sekai, an Isala village; from Larabanga, a Gonj village; as well as from Birufu, a LoWiili

23 Ibid: § 61.

24 See Roesler 2014.



Fig.4 Construction of a Tallensi Compound, Ghana.



Map 7. Distribution of ethnic groups in northern Ghana. *Tribes of the Gold Coast*. International African Institute. Source: Mackenzie Muzumbo, *Tribes of the Northern*. Ethnographic Survey, West Africa, no. 5 (London, 1927).

Fig.5 Ethnic area distribution in northern Ghana. The black dots mark the six places investigated by Labelle Prussin.

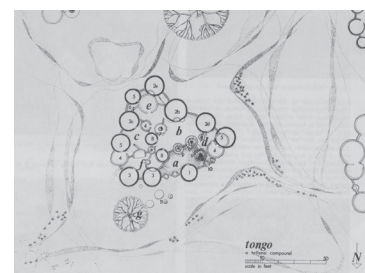


Fig.6 Floor plan of a Tallensi Compound, Ghana.

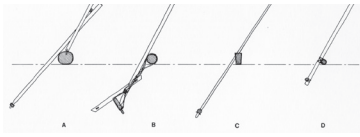


Fig.7 The same construction detail (rafter support) for different Indonesian and Oceanian ethnic groups. A: Karo Batak. B: Toba-Batak. C: Sa'dan-Toraja. D: Palauans.



Fig.8 View of a Sa'dan Toraja village. The house and the store are located opposite each other.

26 See Semper's references to incrustation in style: "Among these ancient formal elements of Hellenic art, none is of such profound importance as the principle of cladding and incrustation, which dominates all pre-Hellenic art and is by no means attenuated or atrophied in the Greek style, but only lives on highly spiritualized and more in the structural-symbolic than in the structural-technical sense, serving beauty and form alone." Semper 1860/1863: 220.

27 "The name 'Toraja' is applied to a number of ethnic groups which inhabit the mountain regions of Southwestern and Central Sulawesi, the island formerly known as Celebes. Of these groups, the Sa'dan (or Tae') Toraja live in the northern part of the island's southwestern peninsula, in the basin of the upper Sa'dan river and its tributaries." Scheffold 1988: 13.

28 Ibid. 10.

29 Domenig 1980: 10. For the essay that produces the ship analogy, see: Lewcock/Brans 1975.

30 Domenig 1980: 11.

settlement. The architectural comparison makes the ethnic differences between these groups visible, which explains its central methodological significance for anthropological research on architecture (Fig. 5). Prussin described the parallelism between ethnic and architectural differences in the north of Ghana as a means of conveying the regional character of cultural diversity (Fig. 6).

"Each of these peoples [...] is territorially distinct, linguistically discrete, and internally cohesive. The distinctiveness is expressed architecturally in building form and surface decoration. As the casual observer crosses over ethnic boundaries, he can identify each of the peoples by architectural nuances, even though he may be completely uninformed about them."<sup>25</sup>

Gaudenz Domenig, on the other hand, reports in his book *Tektonik im primitiven Dachbau* (tectonics in primitive roof construction) on the Batak groups of North-Sumatra (Indonesia), the Karo, Toba, Simelungen and Pakpak and the Sa'dan Toraja of Sulawesi (Fig. 7, 8). Through extensive empirical and archival research on the Indonesian overhanging roof (in German "Kraggiebel-dach")—especially of the Sa'dan Toraja—Domenig drew conclusions for his theory of constructional change, which he conceived as a more complete history of architecture (integrating vernacular forms of architecture and relying on the epistemology of an architect). In *Tektonik im primitiven Dachbau*, Domenig has expanded the melancholic echo of the sedentary on the overcome (nomadic) mobility to the basic feature of constructive practice (and architecture in general). The experiences of instability in fibre- and rod-based bundles and scaffolding, which are significant in terms of building evolution, are still inscribed in the stabilized house construction as "incrustations" (Gottfried Semper)<sup>26</sup>—Domenig calls them "building ornaments".

Together with Nold Egenter, Domenig documented the buildings of the Sa'dan Toraja in 1976 in the context of their fieldwork. The Sa'dan Toraja live in the mountain valleys in the upper reaches of the Sa'dan River, in the northern part of the province of South Sulawesi in Indonesia.<sup>27</sup> Two basic types of buildings—"house" and "store"—as well as two basic types of roof formation—with a "simple cantilever gable" or with a "long gable"—can be distinguished in the Sa'dan Toraja. The specifically shaped construction detail appears here as a crystallization point of the symbolic order of a group (Fig. 9).<sup>28</sup> Domenig opposes declarations that either see the gable overhang or gable lengthening as "a measure to protect against sun and/or rain" or recognize a "similarity between individual forms of the cantilevered gable roof and the shapes of ships".<sup>29</sup> Instead, Domenig seeks the cause "in a constructive circumstance" that also invariably creates symbolic effects.<sup>30</sup>

The genesis and distribution of the constructive pattern of the overhanging roof represents the diachronic problem of this methodologically pioneering study, integrating archaeological, historiographical and ethnographical data. The cantilevered roof can be found throughout the Austronesian region, its traces extend from Madagascar to Easter Island and from Taiwan to New

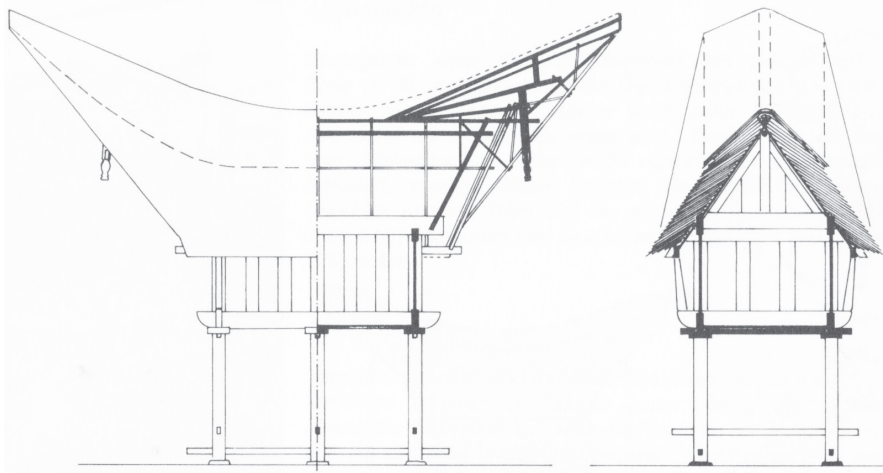


Fig. 9 Longitudinal and cross-section of a Sa'dan Toraja store.

Zealand.<sup>31</sup> Particularly however, the “overhangs” can be observed in all regions of Southeast Asia and Western Oceania (Fig. 10). The widespread distribution of this special feature in the Southeast Asian-Oceanic region as well as “the fact that in southern China and Japan pronounced cantilevered gables” can already be observed on the oldest archaeologically recorded house depictions and house models, led Domenig to assume that with the “quite inconspicuous feature of traditional roof construction we encounter something that ultimately has its roots in the prehistory of building”.<sup>32</sup> In Domenig’s understanding of the theory of construction, the roof and the supporting structure, as they are widespread in the region under investigation, reflect a proto-aesthetic relationship, which he traces back to the (historically relevant) interaction between stable and unstable parts of the building. Domenig also refers to these as the “static” and “parastatic” parts of a construction.<sup>33</sup>

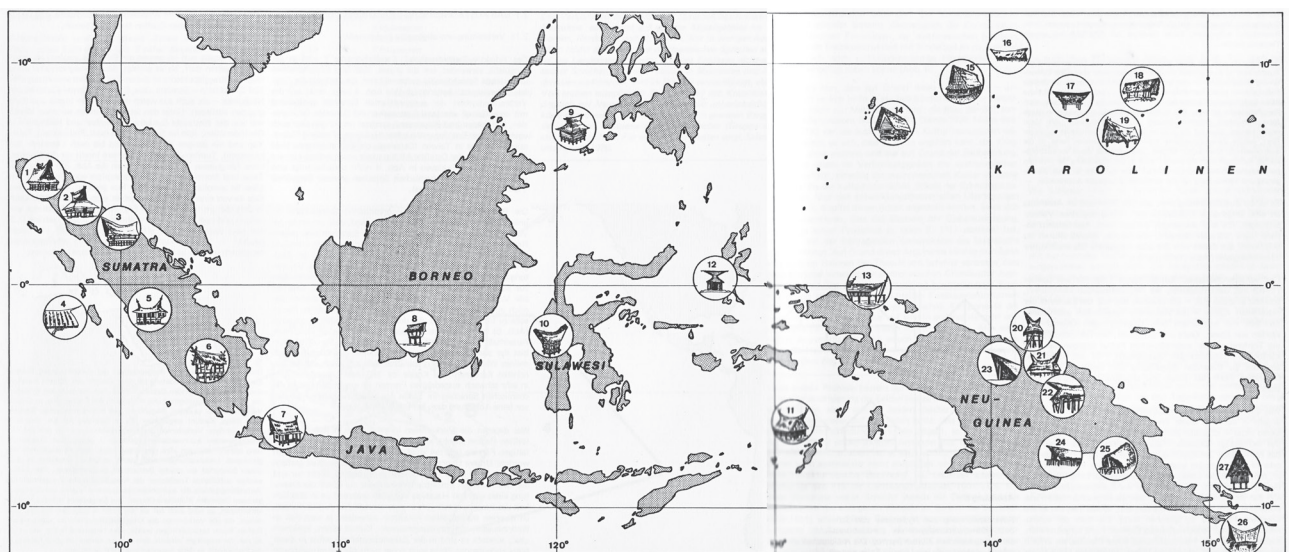
The initial hypothesis, which is also illustrated in a visually striking way, forms the scheme of a transformation that indicates the transition from an unstable framework to a stable supporting structure, from a nomadic to a sed-

31 Linguists have coined the adjective “austronesian” (southern-insular) to describe this vast area. See also Domenig 1980: 27f. and Waterson 1990: 11f.

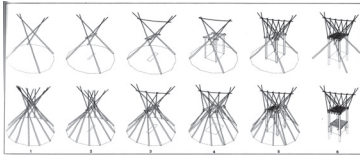
32 Domenig 1980: 24.

33 Ibid. 8.

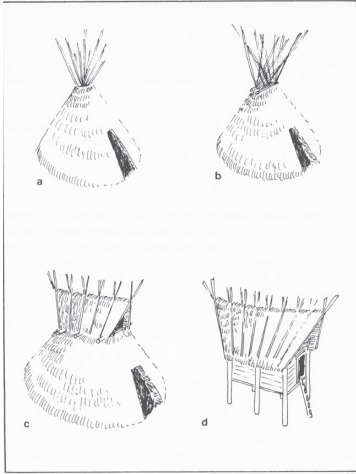
Fig. 10 Distribution of corbelled gable roofs in Southeast Asia.







**Fig. 11** Plausible development series for the creation of gable roofs with a roof overhang from a cone on the ground.



**Fig. 12** Archaeologically documented steps on the development path from the full cone to the cantilevered gable roof.

34 Ibid. 95.

35 “The principle of order mentioned here comes to the fore in the construction of down-to-earth roof forms (‘roof huts’) when the roof structure enclosing the interior merges into an open roof crown at the top, which emerges ‘organically’ from it and yet at the same time plays over and relativizes it as a special kind of opposite.” Domenig 1980: 15.

36 Ibid. 18.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 On the architecture of the Neolithic, see in particular Hodder 1990 and Coudart 1998.

40 Egenter addressed incrustation, which represents a differentiation of Semper’s theory of Stoffwechsel, in the context of current architectural anthropological research: “Semper—undoubtedly already in his polychromy studies—came up with an idea that was later substantiated in art anthropological collecting: his incrustation thesis states that what art history treats speculatively and aesthetically as ornamentation basically manifests older soft industries. [...] [O]n permanent objects in clay, wood, stone or metal, the following always applies: on the hard sources that have come down to us, industries have been preserved that—in their factual state—have long since sunk, or more clearly, rotted away.” Egenter 1987: 16.

entary way of life (Fig. 11, 12). The “full-cone roof with an open ridge crown”, which has been archaeologically attested in Japan and southern China, appears as a “prehistoric (Neolithic) basic form” and thus as the starting point of “the entire tradition” of the cantilevered roof in the Austronesian region.<sup>34</sup> In the course of its transformation, the tent-like structure increasingly takes on the form of a house characterized by a substructure and roof. The “full conical roof with open ridge crown” remains inscribed in the transformation process like an invisible structure and the cantilevered roof emerges from the once open ridge crown. Domenig speaks of a “logic” of “construction, design and decoration”, “which was based on the idea of the open ridge crown”.<sup>35</sup> The “ground-level roof with an open ridge crown” formed the “orientation model” for a structural logic that remains characterised by a basic duality even under conditions of sedentariness: The “principle of stability” is juxtaposed with a “counter-principle that fundamentally demands instability”.<sup>36</sup> A distinction must therefore be made between the “parastatic-parafunctional parts of the construction”, which “protrude from the static-functional substructure”.<sup>37</sup>

The ability to balance building components should be understood as a complex technical and aesthetic capacity that always goes hand in hand with skilled knowledge. One could—in the transition from a nomadic to a sedentary way of life—also describe such a balancing ability as *Neolithic constructivity*, which now seeks to “bring into the work” what was once unstable, the kinetic structure of hunters and gatherers, in a stabilized static structure.<sup>38</sup> With neolithization, processes of material treatment and the properties of the material enter into an ever closer epistemic context; a context that will comprehensively change *constructive culture*.<sup>39</sup> In the light of the proto-aesthetic dualism between stable and unstable building parts, the question of the static overcoming of naturally given spans appears to be of secondary importance: for (non-monumental) residential construction, the necessity of bringing statically and parastatically relevant building parts into balance appears to be far more significant in terms of building evolution than the mere overcoming of natural spans by technical ingenuity.

The dualism between static and parastatic, useful and superfluous parts described by Domenig represents an important consideration in architectural anthropology by assimilating and updating the concept of *incrustation*. Semper’s incrustation concept states that older building technologies manifest themselves as rudiments in the ornaments. Ornaments are an expression of past building industries and construction techniques and not an external application of graphic patterns.<sup>40</sup> The anthropologist Roxana Waterson has also pointed out the ways in which symbolic meanings result from technical considerations: “Sometimes a feature of construction which results from technological considerations may be exploited to symbolic effect. [...] Systematically imposed upon the technological feature, we find a pattern of symbolic meanings.”<sup>41</sup> In the buildings of the Sa’dan Toraja, technical and symbolic aspects of the construction were brought together in indistinguishable ways.



## V. Semantic Battles

An analysis of the different intellectual biographies of the promoters of architectural anthropology can reveal the difficulties of bringing anthropological research conducted by architects into the theoretical reflection taking place in the world's universities. In personal talks that I conducted with protagonists of an early architectural anthropology, rejection and blocked dissertation projects were mentioned. In a Swiss context, there was clear opposition against an empirically grounded architectural theory, that relies on the epistemologies and technical skills of an architect. However, it must be also emphasized that the diachronic mould of the "Institutes for History and Theory" at the architectural schools was, in the 1970s and 1980s, not a foregone conclusion.<sup>42</sup>

Rather, the orientation of these institutes in their content and methods should be seen (as Reinhart Koselleck coined it) in terms of "semantic battles" (semantische Kämpfe); what was contested was the scope of architectural theory and how it should be conducted. Jan Pieper, for example, managed to establish himself as conventional architectural historian and to pursue his anthropological interests under the cloak of historiography. The empirical impetus of anthropological research in architecture, shaped epistemologically by the construction knowledge of the architect, was a recurring challenge to an architectural theory that was still barely consolidated in the 1980s. As we now know, anthropological research in architecture has not been absorbed by architectural theory until recently; on the contrary, there has been an independent differentiation of the field (as architectural anthropology). I would like to briefly delineate four stages of this differentiation.

1) Private Initiatives: As early as 1969 to 1972, Nitschke, Domenig and Speidel made the first, though unsuccessful, attempts to institutionalise the emerging research interest. To this end, detailed conceptual outlines and funding applications were drafted. This led to the foundation of the "Institute for the Anthropology of Building" in Kyoto, Japan, with Nitschke and Speidel as founding members (Fig. 13)<sup>43</sup> Nold Egenter, on the other hand, also attempted to provide wider recognition for his own research interests with the establishment of his own institution (since 1979), the "Documentation Office for Fundamental Studies in Building Theory" (Zurich) and in the founding of a publishing house "Structura Mundi" (Lausanne). Such one-man research ventures were the product of a far-reaching institutional disregard for their research interests. Those who engaged themselves in the field without a permanent employment at a university were forced to finance their research with temporary assignments, lecturing, occasional support by research foundations, and private funds.

2) Early Institutionalisation: Whereas the comparative architectural research in the German-speaking world since the 1960s aimed at a disciplinarily defined identity under the rubric of *Architektur-Anthropologie*, the comparative architectural research in the Anglo-Saxon world pragmatically established itself on the basis of a common research topic named *Vernacular Architecture*. Amos Rapoport rightly remarked in 2001 that the disciplinary project of an ar-

41 Waterson 1990: 78.

42 Exemplary in this respect are the Institute of History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture and Art at MIT (Boston) or the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture at ETH in Zurich.

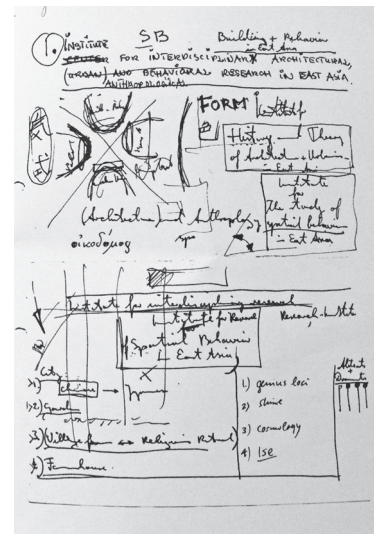


Fig. 13 Günter Nitschke, Manfred Speidel, Gaudenz Domenig, Conceptual outlines of a "Institute for the Anthropology of Building", Kyoto, Japan (1971).

43 Domenig was never a member of the Institute because his independent research was in those years funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Gaudenz Domenig, private communication, December 20, 2016).

44 Amerlinck 2001: 4.

45 Ibid. 17.

46 Le LA/A vise également à contribuer à la construction d'un nouveau champ, l'anthropologie de l'espace, qui doit permettre d'échapper aux divers "réductionnismes" qui guettent les théories architecturales." <http://www.archi.fr/RECHERCHE/annuaireg/pdf/LAA.pdf>, p. 4 (Dec. 28, 2016).

47 On this convergence see Stender, et al. 2025.

48 See Yaneva 2009. Kajijima et.al 2020.

49 Förster 2022. <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/87164/environmental-histories-of-architecture> (03.12.2024)

50 On the term 'microclimate ethnography', see: Roesler 2015a; Roesler/ Kobi 2018; Roesler 2020; Roesler 2022: 35.

chitectural anthropology originated "from the non-English-speaking world".<sup>44</sup> Architectural anthropology and vernacular architecture stand for two different developments founded on the different academic traditions of the respective linguistic domains. In 2001, the Mexican anthropologist Mari-Jose Amerlinck speaks of a dominant "empiro-positivism" in the Anglo-Saxon world and a predominant "phenomenology" in the German-speaking world.<sup>45</sup> Between 1981 and 1993 a first institutionalisation took place in Paris in the form of regular meetings of the "Laboratoire architecture / anthropologie". The meetings led to the establishment of a first international network of architectural anthropology, the "Réseau de la recherche architecturale Architecture / Anthropologie" at the Ecole d'architecture de Paris-La Villette. In particular, its aim was to counter the Euro-centrism and the "reductionism" of contemporary "architectural theory" with a more in-depth knowledge of cultural sciences.<sup>46</sup>

3) Architectural Ethnography: Meanwhile architectural anthropology is (in contrast to its beginnings) an interdisciplinary research-field of architects and anthropologists, dealing with planetary urbanization. Over the last twenty years, an increasing interweaving has taken place between architectural anthropology, vernacular architecture research and a revived material culture research in architecture, anthropology, and urban geography.<sup>47</sup> At the beginning of this convergence were the *Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, edited by Paul Oliver in 1997, and the volume *Architectural Anthropology*, edited by Mari-Jose Amerlinck in 2001. With significant works by Labelle Prussin (*Architecture in Northern Ghana*), Amos Rapoport (*House, Form and Culture*), and Paul Oliver (*Shelter and Society*), all published in 1969, the year should be understood as being seminal to the foundation of both architectural anthropology and of vernacular architecture research. The more recent development of architectural anthropological research is today known as "architectural ethnography", in which both the conception and production of architecture are brought into view, considering also the architecture office.<sup>48</sup>

4) Environmental History: Most recently, the environmental crisis has provided an unprecedented framework for new types of experimental fieldwork and historiography. The term "Environmental History" stands for a wide and hybrid range of methods and temporalities, all of which, however, are under the spell of what is to come.<sup>49</sup> During fieldwork, researchers gather data related to the actual environmental conditions on site. As artefacts, urban microclimates represent (more or less consciously designed) thermal zones with social, ecological, and political implications. In our own comparative research, we rely on "microclimate ethnography"<sup>50</sup> to create descriptions of urban microclimates that make the overlapping natural and social dimensions of the urban climate visible. The mapping of the urban climate is enhanced by methods of qualitative social research; insights into subjective and objective issues of the urban climate and energy supply in different neighbourhoods are gained through interviews with local actors, also addressing social inequalities and climate justice.

## VI. The Archive and the Field

At large, one can speak of a historically parallel genesis of architectural theory and architectural anthropology. Opportunities for the cultivation of an ethnographically informed architectural theory would certainly have existed. However, an integration of the architectural anthropological research fields into the architectural theoretical reflection did not take place until recently—it would have represented a radical challenge to the historiographical self-understanding of the architectural theorist, as mapped out in the 1960s by Tafuri and others. With his investigations, inspired by a Marxist philosophy of history, Tafuri ultimately played into the hands of the educated (art) historians, even though the *architect as architectural historian* has become a widespread phenomenon.

However, for a globally oriented architectural theory, which takes on the contemporary spatial phenomena of the world, the historiographical approaches (coined by European archives) proved themselves more and more insufficient. In particular, the progressive planetary urbanisation and the environmental crisis pose enormous challenges for architectural theoretical reflection today. Although the *postcolonial turn* in architectural theory points in the right direction, it has been too little understood that the study of forms of appropriation in colonial architecture includes contemporary phenomena and thus methods of fieldwork, thereby overstepping the horizon of the historiographical.<sup>51</sup> It is precisely today's globally oriented architectural theory, which deals with questions of the transfer of culture and technology, that is dependent on analytical forms that combine diachronic and synchronic, historiographical and ethnographic research methods.

While history has been a guarantee for a solid understanding of (possible) development in architecture in recent decades, current environmental upheavals (in the context of climate change) are leading to a questioning of this status. In the field of tension between “experience” and “expectation” (Reinhard Koselleck), architecture is increasingly falling under the spell of what is to come. The future, rather than the past, forms the epistemological framework for research with a temporal character, whereby *fieldwork* becomes a prerequisite for *future studies*. Therefore, new, non-historiographical methods exploring future imaginaries are needed. As Kian Goh has emphasized “[t]hese imagined futures must proceed from existing social conditions, what anthropologist James Holston calls the ‘ethnographic present.’”<sup>52</sup> Or, as the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued 2009, the future (in the twenty-first century) eludes the “grasp of historical sensibility”<sup>53</sup> due to the unprecedented nature of the climate crisis.

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51 See: Roesler 2015b.

52 Goh 2021: 20.

53 Chakrabarty 2009: 197.

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## Figures

Fig. 1, 2, 13 Gaudenz Domenig.

Fig. 3 Semper, Gottfried (1852), *Practical Art in Metals and Hard Materials*. In *The Ideal Museum*. Redrawn by the author.

Fig. 4, 5, 6, 7 Labelle Prussin, *Architecture in Northern Ghana* (1969).

Fig. 8 Kis-Jowak, Jowa Imre / Nooy-Palm, Hetty / Schefold, Reimar / Schulz-Dornburg, Ursula: *Banua Toraja – Changing Patterns in Architecture and Symbolism Among the Sa'dan Toraja, Sulawesi Indonesia*. Amsterdam 1988.

Fig. 9, 10, 11, 12 Source: Gaudenz Domenig. *Tektonik im primitiven Dachbau* (1980).

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