

# **VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE - WHERE DO THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS COME FROM?**

**Some notes regarding the "anthropology of the house"**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The 'Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World' (EVAW) edited by Paul Oliver can be considered as a milestone in global house research. It has raised the ethnology of the house and of dwelling to a new global level. What conventionally was attributed to folklore studies too is included. In view of this global collection of data related to traditional house cultures it is not surprising that expressions like 'the anthropology of the house' and 'anthropology of architecture' are increasingly used. Questioning the origins of house traditions, their relation to social structure and their often dense symbolisms has become a new standard.

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### **Introduction**

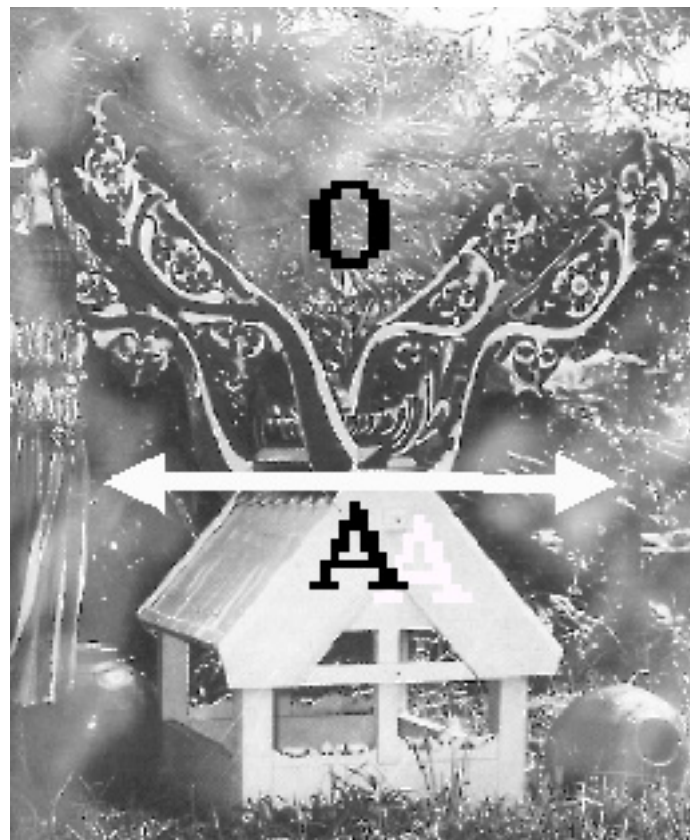
Fig. 1, 2, 3



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**Fig. 1:** What a strange building! It seems basically geometrically conceived like a house or a houselike container on a post. On the other hand it shows a tremendous dynamism in regard to what we call decoration. There is a bird on top and for the rest we see fernlike protrusions with subdivisions and in many directions mainly above the roof. (Salong Mausoleum from Rumah Laseh, Kejaman, Sarawak; Dorothy Pelzer, 1968 [Waterson 1990:201])

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**Fig. 2:** Here too, the rooftop is protruding. And like in the first example: birds. Do they indicate a relation with the heavens, with the cosmos? This is the way many peoples interpret such symbolisms. But probably there is another way to understand this, more related to architecture. (House shaped tomb (joro) at Lumban Silambi, Toba; Bartlett 1934 [Waterson 1990:212])

**Fig. 3:** Maybe this example might help us with a somehow more simple model. It is closely related to the above example (Festival to appease the dead). It shows four strongly curved-types of branches protruding from a small whitewashed hut. Seen with the naturalists eyes we never would be able to understand what is meant. The lower part is artificial, Architecture (A). The upper part is natural, evidently vital. Both parts are structurally and physically related. However it is difficult to understand why: it seems to be a 'Maximum-Contrast-Form'. Above / below, natural/ artificial, stable/ dynamic. (O) in contrast to (A) for Architecture and stability, place etc.. We call the principle in this maximum contrast form "categorical polarity", or "polar harmony". Note also that, though very different in their specific forms, both roofs have something in common, 'categorical polarity'. We can say: there is a '(categorically)polar analogy' among them. They are both quasi identical in regard to the principle of polar harmony. thus, they are not only aesthetically balanced, they represent an order. If we assume that this balanced order can be small or spatially extended into the relation of heaven and earth, we can say that our two houses are the basic foundation of a potentially harmonious world order implying "All in One and One in All" ('Hen kai pan' in ancient Greece). Note that we are speaking of a basically aesthetic concept, which in fact has a universally harmonious and unifying meaning. (Iban 'sungkup' burial hut made for the great festival to entertain the dead, 'Gawai Antu'; Sandin 1963 [Waterson 1990:201])

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Let us have a look at a photo (**Fig. 1**) published by Roxana Waterson in her book on Southeast Asian vernacular architecture with the title 'The living House' (1990). The picture shows a small houseform used as a Mausoleum. The roof is surrounded by wildly protruding plant symbolisms. A kind of vernacular Baroque? How can we understand such 'dynamic' decorations of roofs and houseforms? **Fig. 2 and 3** give some further examples. Maybe this world adheres to a particular deep-rooted philosophy which we may know from other regions of the world? For instance in China where, on sacred buildings, we find wild dragons on dynamically curved roofs, contrasting immensely with the 'rigid rationality' of the lower part of the structure?

Evidently, such questions can not easily be answered. First, because conventional anthropology is a fairly heterogeneous discipline with numerous subdisciplines, views, approaches, theories. In addition most of these subdisciplines and approaches are formed by the European history of culture and thus often project prejudices on the materials rooted in other cultures.

Thus the methods to do research with traditional house cultures are still very heterogeneous, as can be seen in the first volume of the encyclopedia with its numerous disciplinary, culturo-theoretical, and environmental perspectives. In addition we have the countless objective conditions of 'design' and production as they are described in volume 2 and 3.

In fact, the vernacular house is a highly complex phenomenon. We risk endless approaches without really understanding the essence of the house. In the following we want to shortly outline how cultural anthropology understands the 'anthropology of the

house'. Basically there are the following questions:

- 1) Is the vernacular house merely the result of external factors that were perceived by humans and used to produce house forms?
- 2) Or was it rather the human being producing ideas which were materialized and kept through time, thus producing often bizarre forms as an expression of the human mind?
- 3) Or, can we understand the house itself and its precursors as a relatively autonomous development, which autonomously produced structural conditions which were perceived by human beings, were then actively recreated and further developed?

Most anthropologists and architectural house researchers would emphasise points one and two in combination. Most would be sceptical in regard to point 3, or would even reject it completely. Later on we want to show that point 3 makes sense and allows best to explain the great variety of forms and arrangements. But first we will shortly outline the conventional arguments.

## 2.

### THE CONVENTIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE TRADITIONAL HOUSE

#### *The origins of the vernacular house*

Let us first do a short excursion by following the entry 'Anthropology' in the first volume of the Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World. Reimar Schefold gives a good outline of the problem of the anthropological approach towards vernacular architecture.

***Factor-analysis [Rapoport]:*** Amos Rapoport was one of the first who in new ways studied traditional house forms worldwide with a specifically developed method. His factor analysis, as it can be called, is known today to a wider public interested in architecture and is also still used by many in spite of its highly problematic structure. Rapoport has basically interpreted house forms as individual units, which is a rather problematic assumption. In fact the traditional house is, in whatever culture, always an accumulation of various and different lines of development. The roof is a primary evolutionary line. Similarly the entrance, the window and the walls have their own developments. Similarly the fireplace, the hearth, the stove. All these components have their own lines of development and can combine to form this or that type of house according to various conditions. Consequently Rapoport's method is a rationalistic approach, which deforms our view rather than clarifying our understanding of the traditional house.

***Sociocultural factors [Morgan]:*** house forms can also be strongly related to patterns of cultural behaviour, of cultural values and worldviews. Lewis Henry Morgan had been a precursor of such studies using the method of factor analysis. He identified

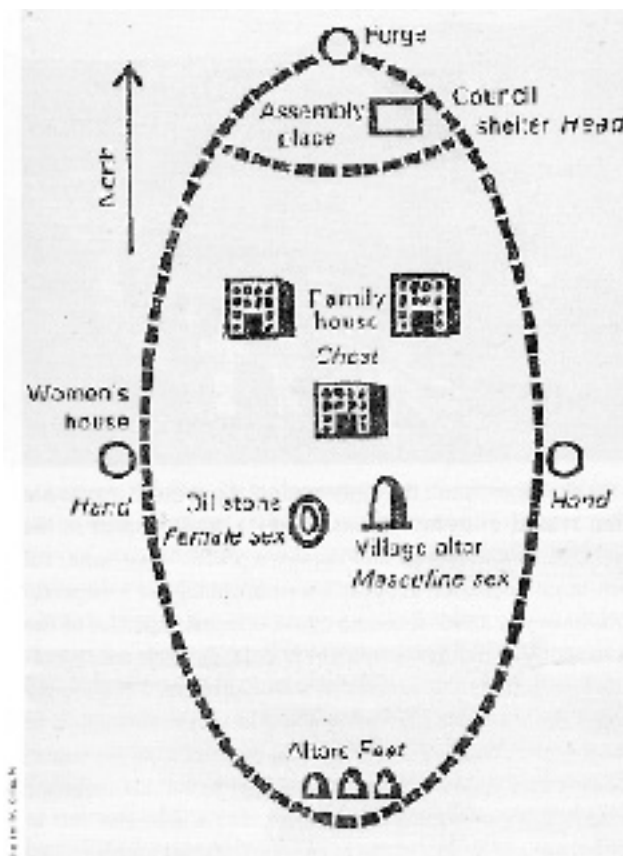
various types of social behaviour and customs which could be related to the longhouse among Indian tribes researched. Morgan's basic framework was his theory on the social evolution of mankind (savagery, barbarism, civilisation) which he combined with an evolution of family structure (promiscuous, monogamy, patriarchal monogamy) and further also with data related to the "Houses and House-life of American Aborigines" (1881). Among the Iroquois who - according to his classification - lived a primitive communism, he interpreted the longhouse in regard to this communal life, particularly in regard to the capacity to invite outsiders and to offer them great hospitality. But, in this case too, one will have to remain sceptical in regard to such unilinear correlations. They transmit the impression of a purely functional first hand evaluation.

***Symbolic conceptions [Griaule/ Dieterlen]:*** Referring to Martin Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen (1954/1963) Schefold maintains further that symbolic conceptions are culturally important paradigms. Concepts of the adequate order and relations in the "social and cosmic universe" can play an important role in the construction of a house. Griaule and Dieterlen's report about the Dogon huts in Mali had shown how a "very complex cosmology" finds its expression in an "esoteric anthropomorphical symbolism" which influences the plan of the houses and settlements and also defines their form (**Fig. 4**). Such studies doubtless produce a certain fascination because they reveal an unexpected spiritual grandeur in what is considered simple in the framework of conventional ideas of primitivism. However, such studies mainly based on interviews should also sceptically be questioned. For many researchers the expressions 'cosmos' and 'cosmology' are very quick at hand. A closer view shows that the emphasis of the term is on the concept of a well structured or aesthetic order. In its European history this could spatially be extremely limited. In Ancient Greece it could mean a local military order or could be limited on the face like 'cosmetics' (Kerschensteiner 1962). From the 14th century in Europe the term was used in astronomy and thus gained its universal dimensions. Evidently anthropological research is unbiasedly ready to accept such terms. They are filled with Eurocentric contents without critically asking about the factual local implications. Here too there are great risks to commit mistakes which should be avoided.

***Multiple factor thesis [Schefold]:*** Finally Schefold gives his own overall conclusion saying that there are many factors defining houseform. One of these factors can be of great importance, but the interaction of several factors can be equally important. Referring to the cross culturally comparative method of anthropology or ethnology Schefold emphasises the importance of traditions. Communally important conditions may have developed basic forms among some groups or cultures, whereas considerable variations are shown among neighbouring or related units. It is clear, the comparative method of anthropology lacks history. Neither written nor monumental sources are available. Consequently the insights remain vague and often speculative. We can not maintain anything of a really reliable character. If on the other hand house research - by means of technological periodisation for instance - manages to introduce new temporal criteria, this might be of considerable importance.

## Conventional Anthropology: an example

Fig. 4



**Fig. 4:** Schefold mentions this example of an "anthropomorphism in the idealised plan of a Dogon settlement". Evidently there is not much similarity with our Eurocentric view of the human figure. It would be interesting to clarify these indicators further with the attempt to be able to understand the conditions of the whole image behind. (EVAW 1/:7)

### *The symbolic meaning of the vernacular house*

**Symbolic dimensions:** Not all anthropological studies are focused on genetic factors in regard to houseform. Schefold interpretes symbolic meanings in a similarly important autonomous dimension. "After all, in most traditional societies the house is man's most important three dimensional creation. It creates space within space, it places borders around a piece of the universe and, in so doing," Schefold continues, the house "is the

thing which obviously can serve as an expression of conceptions about the world in its entirety." Evidently this suggestion too has a projective character. If we assume that the cultural process of space conception runs from local models to the environmental and, very late in cultural history, to the universal, then, the basic ontology or 'worldview' must consequently be searched in an environmental model or 'microcosmic' prototype, not in the universe.

Schefold mentions examples related to three different types of symbolic meanings: cosmos symbolism [Eliade], social organisation [Cunningham] and gender symbolism [Bourdieu]. We want to critically discuss these three groups in the following.

***Cosmos-symbolism [Eliade]:*** Schefold operates with wellknown theories in this context, as in the following example, implicitly referring to Mircea Eliade (1995a, b). In many regions of Southeast-Asia - he says - the longhouse is considered a symbolic representation of a threepartite cosmos. Heaven, earth and underworld appear in the symbolic meaning attributed to the roof, the living rooms and the basis below. "The house thus forms a miniature cosmos, micro-cosmos." Evidently this interpretation reflects Mircea Eliade's spatial structuralism. In early civilisations and before, man had become overwhelmed in view of the endless spaces of the cosmos and therefore, honouring these dimensions, reproduced these axial systems on earth in his environment 'en miniature' as sacred places, temples and so on. Of course, as indicated above, this is also a (theologically founded) Eurocentric concept. However, if we rather emphasise evolutionary principles of hominid space perception, Mircea Eliade can also be interpreted inversely. We would then have to say: 'the house traditions mentioned show a stereotype order of categorical polarity, which reflects analogies to the environment perceived in tripartite ways of heaven, intermediate world and lower world. The origins of this perception are not assumed in the perception of macrocosmic structural conditions as it is maintained in the case of Eliade, but are considered to be related to a model within the tradition of the society researched. The concept of 'macrocosm' in this evolutionary view would thus be merely a vague speculation, a structural projection using the local model.

***Social organisation [Durckheim/ Mauss, Rassers; Cunningham]:*** The second group too shows its strong leaning to the Eurocentric tradition of theories: French positivism, in particular Durckheim and Mauss with the thesis of the social origins of symbolic classification. In this context Schefold hints to Rasser's survey of the Javanese house. Its internal divisions show the attribution of a sacred, closed and female internal part with a profane open and male part. Rassers interpretes this as a socio-cosmic dualism which - according to him - is characteristic for Java in general. Here too one should be aware that the primary conditions of this concept are related to macrocosmic dimensions. Evidently it would be more difficult to search the microcosmic prerequisites in Javanese culture. However, the primacy of social organisation as maintained by positivism has been questioned, says Schefold. But the "holistic view remains that various aspects of a culture are interconnected in an all-embracing order, the basis for all structural anthropological approaches." Cunningham's study of the Atoni on Timor shows how social (lineage), political and cosmological oppositions

define the House of the Atoni and the life within. They can be taken as an example how traditional societies lacking script can store their ideas within the house. This may be valid for those living within the concerned tradition, but might be much more difficult to understand for those who come from outside somehow like 'aliens'.

***Gender-symbolism [Bourdieu]:*** Finally Schefold hints to Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the Berber house (1972) which is described as strongly characterised by gender symbolisms. Female categories, which imply darkness, are connected to the internal part of the house. This stands in strong contrast to male aspects indicating outside. They are considered cultural, are implying fertilising capacities and are related to bright light. Correspondingly, the main gate is important. It has to be in the east, letting the virile light enter. Here too we can take these informations as they are and attribute them to a general symbolic disposition of man. On the other hand we can remain sceptical and ask for the models within the society concerned.

***House societies:*** In an anthropology of the house, Levi-Strauss' indication (1982) on the importance of the term house ('societes de la maison') among many European aristocrats should not be neglected. In this framework, the house in its physical formation appears as a fundamental category, as objectification of common interests, however, limited on certain social strata. Ancient names, founder titles, ritual functions and sacred heritage were related to such a 'moral person of the house'. It forms the point of convent for group formations.

### ***The projection of euro-historical disciplines***

The problem of all these heterogeneous interpretations consists in the fact that to a great extent they project Euro-historically founded concepts on foreign materials. The methodological relations are not clarified. How do they all relate, these various symbolic meanings? Are they basically different from each other? Or do they seem different to us, only because we tend to classify them differently (anthropomorphous, gender-relations, macro/ micro-cosmic, inside/ outside spatially etc.)? Are they connected in quite different ways than we would expect? Do these societies search for oppositions in general in order to combine them into harmonious units irrespective of their factual content? Are we confronted with an entirely different philosophy?

Schefold closes his contribution by emphasising the potentially fertile cooperation between architects and anthropologists, but he sees both domains fairly different. In the conventional sense of interdisciplinarity he thinks the two fields might be able to produce positive results by close cooperations.

However, this is a very onesided presentation. It is based on the idea that anthropology, particularly cultural anthropology, or social anthropology offers a sufficiently stable system, a system which can easily integrate architecture somehow as a new subdiscipline. But this is a far too simplified view. Conventionally it has to do with the professional 'low-contact factor' between anthropologists and architects.

This last sentence leads us to the other side. Architecture itself has also developed its own anthropological architectural theory, mainly as a reaction against an intra-professional problem. We are speaking of the architectural crisis triggered by the art historians in the end 60ies of the last century. Some people call it the "Charles Jencks-coup"! It included the death-declaration of modernism and the return to style history [postmodernism]. It also postulated written history of architecture as architectural theory!

We want to shortly outline this new "intra-disciplinary" anthropology of architecture in the following.

### 3.

## THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF HABITAT AND ARCHITECTURE

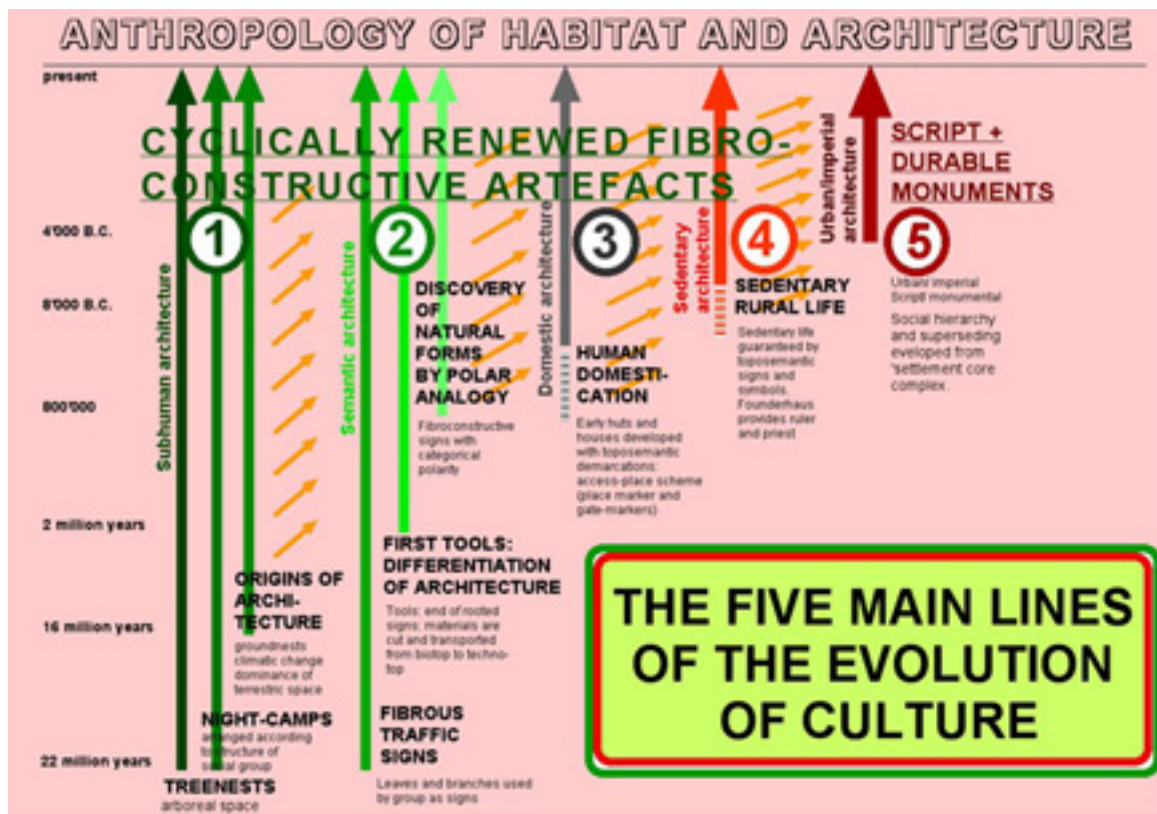
### *Structure, Methods and new Outlooks*

Its main starting points were the rather chaotic discussions between Modernism and Postmodernism in the domain of architecture. The new position critically points to the irrational dissection of aesthetically defined 'high' architecture and pragmatic 'low' building which is basically responsible for the hollow rhetorics in the architectural field at present (ca. 100 different styles, acc. to Jencks). Further, 'Vitruvianism' is considered as 'architectural theory', in fact a regress into 19th century concepts, or, in other words, a post-modern architectural fundamentalism. In addition, Rykwert's book 'On Adams House' (1972) searches the ideas of the 'primordial hut' in the Bible, which can be taken as an indicator for the complete helplessness of art historians if it comes to clarify evolutionary questions in regard to architecture (similarly Rykwerts 'dancing column' 1996)! See in this context also the incredibly narrow-minded 'librarywork-program' of the ETH-Z/ gta-institute under Oechslin. (Oechslin 2003)

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### The Evolution of Constructivity and Architecture

#### Fig. 5



[enlarge](#)

**Fig. 5:** Architectural Anthropology: This scheme shows the main lines of the evolution of constructivity and architecture.

- (1) shows the hominoid tradition of nestbuilding, treenests, nightcamps and groundnests with rooted materials, the latter forming the subhuman prototype of architecture.
- (2) A further important process is the evolution of the semantic domain: the use of fibrous and fibroconstructive signs and symbols. Most important in this line are the impacts of the first tools: materials can be cut and transported elsewhere for construction which allowed a great formal, functional and topological differentiation of early architecture. Equally important is the development of categorical polarity with semantic architecture. It forms a model to see categorical polarity of natural forms (e.g. top and trunk of tree, horns and head of animals etc.) in analogy with the categorical polarity of self made artefacts.
- (3) The later huts and houses are formed by the two primary lines.
- (4) The primary sedentary type is agrarian village, in which semantic architecture is the source of ontological developments.
- (5) The urban line takes over the agrarian system but manipulates it either by monumentalising (temples) or verbalising and fixing it in this form (e.g. AT). These transitions are of great importance even today. But many are not aware of these connexes and transitions. Conventional theories are fixed on history in the strict sense. The new traits only show when using structural history (ethno(pre-)history [or 'anthropological definition of material culture]).

In this critical framework architecture is newly defined in scientific terms as "all what man and his predecessors built and build." (**Fig. 5**) This new anthropological definition leads us to some basic discoveries! First we become aware of a technologically new "fibroconstructive industry" which is of pre-lithic importance and suggests an entirely

new temporal framework to discuss architecture in an evolutionary dimension. Two different and new domains of architecture are discovered, "subhuman architecture" (**Fig. 6, 7**) and "semantic architecture" (**Fig. 8-12**). We gain a new classification (**Fig. 5**):

- (1) subhuman [nestbuilding behaviour of the Great Apes],
- (2) semantic [life-tree- fetish- maypole-complex],
- (3) domestic [vernacular architecture],
- (4) sedentary [settlement core complex] and
- (5) urban architecture [early city-states and the monumentalisation of fibroconstructive village cultures] (Egenter 1992).

### *Some general points*

Methodologically this new classification of architecture calls for a new approach derived from "structural history" (Wernhardt 1981). It is called "ethno(pre-)historical method" (Egenter 1994a). Material culture is not studied conventionally according to different disciplines like prehistory, history and ethnology. It is defined anthropologically, that is collectively. This has great advantages for architectural research. In fact, architecture, with its endless examples of 'fibrous materials' used in ethnology and folklore cultures, now lets us discover a "soft prehistory" (Egenter 1986, 1990d) which might have been much more important than the "hard prehistory" of the archaeologists. 'Soft prehistory' produces new perspectives in regard to the 'artefact' concept. Most exciting is the new term 'prelithic fibroconstructive industries' because the artefact concept gains new temporal depth, particularly with the primary class of 'subhuman architecture' (see below).

A second important point: semantic architecture had important functions in the generation of sedentary life and culture. Its toposemantic characteristics allowed it to develop into a temporary or sedentary territorial demarcation system in which certain social individuals or groups transmitted their territorial claims to other individuals or social groups in the present, and, by cyclical renewal of the fibrous demarcation to later individuals or social groups. As a perceptual and conceptional model "semantic architecture" autonomously introduced and developed high ontological values which later became the basis of aesthetics, cognition, and religion (Egenter 2001).

Both classes also provide us with entirely new artefact depths. Architecture can now be considered with an artefact depth of 16 million years. And constructive behaviour can be considered with 22 million years of temporal depth. This will lead to quite new types of organisation of our knowledge regarding the human past. Constructive behaviour, achitecture and sedentary life will become very important factors in our theories of cultural evolution (Egenter 2001)

Fig. 5 shows these fairly new parameters outlined in a schema which lets us understand the evolution of architecture and culture in close relationship. Note that not the toolmaker is the central figure anymore, we put the capacity to construct with fibrous

materials ("constructivity", Yerkes 1929), and its products "architecture", "demarcated habitat" and "increasingly sedentary life", finally "monumentalisation of fibrous culture" into the centre of the process of hominisation. Important is also the degree of expanding space perception and space control. We can conclude a lot from the structural models we discover in this new perspective. There are essentially five evolutionary lines, all surviving into the present as 'living traditions'. The first three are most important here.

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