

THE POLITICS OF PRETERNATURAL SPACE AT THE GREAT ZIMBABWE

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

ELLEN SOROKA

Arizona State University

The hegemony of western architectural pedagogy is founded on two conventions in the organization of space:

- a. It assumes that land is inherently property to be acquired and owned. In other words, space and territory are proprietary and can be marketed. Space is compartmentalized, and its boundaries are determined through mathematical and astronomically based techniques of surveying and cartography.
- b. Philosophically, the historical western bias of orthogonally compartmentalized space has a long and complex history contingent on assumptions founded on Euclidean Geometry and Cartesian space, which were reconsidered when 19th century mathematics introduced us to the concept of curved space, and 20th century physics introduced us to the theory of irregular space. The attempt to transcend Cartesian space in modern architecture depended on breaking the rubric of compartmentalization — a classical principle, Representational attempts to illustrate another dimension, nth dimensional geometry and so on, have not entirely succeeded in the 20th century because they are based on classical techniques of representation.

The phenomenon I am describing is a western political spatial paradigm whose origins are classically western and whose understanding goes beyond the local context of landholding and property ownership to a ubiquitous and commercial, parceling of space. The conventional western political “map” is thus highly linear, incredibly precise, partitioned and “filled.” At the international level, we understand space as clearly demarcated cells as are described in some studies of animal territoriality. As anthropologist Paul Bohannan notes: “We are the only people in the world who use seafaring equipment to determine our position on the ground.”¹

African vernacular architecture is regarded as a parochial architecture noted for its utilitarian basis, its virtuous simplicity and its ecological fit within a given environment. The fact that its communal constitution and primitive technology is not easily commodified has been reason enough to dismiss it from serious



Fig. 1. Chevron Patterning on the hill at the Great Zimbabwe — this pattern has been found decorating huts, other ruins in Zimbabwe, pottery, utensils, divining bones and tablets — this is one of four patterns regularly used in Zimbabwe, meaning “snake of fertility.”

consideration academically and commercially. African vernacular architecture is not often evaluated according to issues of ownership and occupational patterns, both public and private, by architects and architectural historians.² Efforts in that direction reveal the principle that vernacular architecture is a living language, its disposition leaving animated marks which are intrinsic to the language of its cultural character but which are often perceived as “decoration” rather than architecture by architects.³

The living text of African traditional architecture is therefore not consequential to the interests of architects and architectural historians, and thus our pedagogical training becomes an impediment to a larger understanding. As Jean-Paul Lebeuf has noted, African traditional architecture represents a kind of text or language whose meaning can be understood through its orientation, form, materials, construction process and details. It has its own history, philosophy and cosmology.

The archaeology of settlements with stone architecture in modern Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa by Bantu-speaking Africans has been, since the beginning of the present century, a



Fig. 2. Great Zimbabwe, main enclosure.

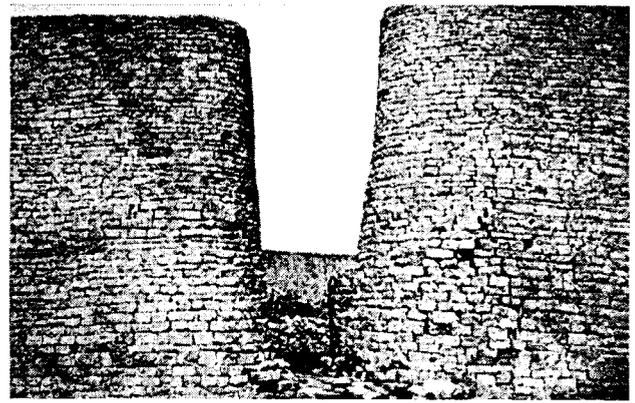


Fig. 4. Wall endings are corbelled.



Fig. 3. Main enclosure wall and conical tower, dated in period of 1400 – 1600 AD.

dramatically debated research topic amongst archaeologists and anthropologists. The fact that most of this stone vernacular architecture has been systematically studied by either anthropologists or archaeologists rather than architects betrays the dominance of an inbred pedagogy within the discipline of architecture. The history of the narration of the Great Zimbabwe is a case in point. Despite numerous excavations and professionally organized archaeological digs for over a century, the purpose of the Great Zimbabwe (an unorthodox curvilinear assemblage of free standing walls, at times 30-40 feet high, that were not roofed) is still being debated by archaeologists and anthropologists without architectural input.

Carbon dating has been inconsistent (origin -between 3rd and 9th centuries A.D.), and archaeological digs have had to rely on incomplete data due to numerous amateur digs in the early 20th century that rearranged and muddled five to six levels of strata. Where in the past archaeologists have been concerned with problems of subsistence, dating and origins, it now seems important to examine the architecture of the Great Zimbabwe as an African architecture associated with the indigenous and spontaneous evolution of localized technology and the necessary relationship between the social practices and the spatial organization of those cultures that claim it. Specifically, I'd like to explore the relationship between the Great Zimbabwe and the Shona "musha" in terms of spatial organization.

The Shona claim that the Great Zimbabwe (a dry stone monument) was authored by the Shona (originally Bantu) culture in Zimbabwe. This claim is complicated by many facts. The Royal Shona (the Mugabe totem) to date primarily still builds in light timber frame construction (pole and dhaka) as it did prior to the speculative dating of the Great Zimbabwe —this light frame construction filled in with mud or poles, allowed migratory patterns of living. There are exceptions in the Inyanga Mountains of Zimbabwe of stone and dhaka (not dry stone) architecture by the Manyika culture (a subculture of the Shona). There are examples of stone terracing in the Torwa culture in Zimbabwe and by the Manyika people in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. There are hundreds of significantly smaller "zimbabwes" built of dry stone architecture throughout Zimbabwe — unidentified and not characterized but whose stone construction typologically differs from one to the next. These smaller zimbabwes are often very different from the Great Zimbabwe in terms of construction style, (the stone construction at the Great Zimbabwe has been typed by Thomas Huffman into five different construction styles) as the Great Zimbabwe is different than traditional Shona pole and dhaka dwellings.

Finally, the Vends People in northern South Africa (derivatively identified as coming from the Shona culture) still use a similar type of free standing dry stone walling to outline their "kraals" seemingly to communicate power. The Shona and Ba Venda cultures share language syntax similarities and according to oral tradition, the Ba Vends

in the Northern Transvaal of South Africa today are thought to have migrated south from southern Zimbabwe.

The 500 smaller zimbabwes scattered throughout Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique and South Africa and the Great Zimbabwe suggests an encompassing civilization which has been dispersed and quite differentiated regionally. Attempts to interpret the Great Zimbabwe have assumed multiple interpretations but, each has suggested a power hierarchy. What seems clearer is that the Great Zimbabwe is a place of resource, as opposed to a place of ownership. Most recently, its eastern end of the Acropolis was used as a place of worship during Zimbabwe's civil war and used as a place of divining — a place to consult with ancestors (mhondoro) and God (Mwari) during divining ceremonies. Zimbabweans still claim that the contact with their ancestors allowed them to strategically win the war against white Rhodesia.

In the case of the Shona people of Zimbabwe, no one has been able to adequately explain how stone was regularly used as a technology within traditional construction patterns, since their traditional domestic architecture has been composed of pole and dhaka. Going beyond simple construction technology to a study of the social use of space amidst the Shona people — particularly the “musha” homestead whose syntax has some organizational similarities to the constitutional space at the Great Zimbabwe — sheds a little more light on this debate.

The Shona “musha,” or, “home of a kinship group” (a nuclear family or an extended generational family) is a place by virtue of the social relationships amongst its members — in other words it can be mobile and maintain its integrity. However, despite the non-hierarchical appearance of a typical musha, the arrangement of its social functions are fairly characteristic. The entrance to the musha must always be from the west, which is reiterated in the older Hill complex entrance and the Western entrance to the Great Enclosure at the Great Zimbabwe. Upon entering the compound of a musha, often surrounded by a head high fence of grass, or a “mapunda,” one enters a courtyard or “chivanza” — which is a place of communion. From this open, stark courtyard, the compound breaks down into outside working areas for domestic use and pole and dhaka huts where use can vary functionally, i.e. a hut that is a place for sleeping may not have a bed, and it may also be a place for worship. A bathroom may be a social center. Since virtually all daytime domestic activities are performed in the outdoors and most social activities as well, areas of the courtyard are entirely specific in their uses and as much a part of the ‘built environment’ as are any of the enclosed huts. Clearly the shona musha is a ‘fluid’ social environment.

If we compare this to the figurative remains at the Great Zimbabwe we find a similar spatial fluidity in terms of inside and outside space and we also find dry stone walling defining areas of transition as well, as areas of place or stasis.

To sum up, there are four phenomena that have contributed to politicizing the narrative of the Great Zimbabwe :

1. Scholarly study of the Great Zimbabwe has been

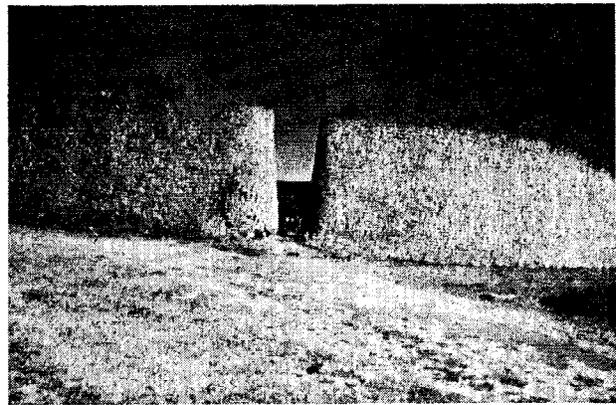


Fig. 5. Conical Tower (archaeological digs have revealed the tower to be solid).

manipulated for over a hundred years by opposing political agendas (first Rhodesia's and now Zimbabwe's) intent on proving that the Great Zimbabwe, from the beginning, was either a non-African monument built by non-Africans (i.e. Phoenicians and Arabs) or an African monument built by a specific African blood totem.

2. The public and private habitation patterns of the musha, as well as their respective building technology, demonstrate both great similarities to and marked differences from the Great Zimbabwe.
3. The 500 dry-stone smaller Zimbabwe's that appear across and throughout Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa suggest an encompassing African civilization whose technology revolved around the use of stone. However, these smaller zimbabwes often differ dramatically from one to the next in terms of formal typologies and building technology.
4. The Shona homestead, or musha, does not represent individual proprietorship but rather is a “home of a kinship group” — which can be extended as well as be mobile.

This fact alone allowed English colonial appropriation, and, even 15 years after Zimbabwe's civil war ended under Shona rule, sustains the impasse between landowners and the Shona culture, whose migratory living patterns often result in squatting on privately owned land. This also helps us understand Zimbabwe's natural affinity to a socialist distribution of half of the land owned by former Rhodesians. But, it doesn't help explain why the Great Zimbabwe was clearly intended to prevail as a permanent “place,” as the Shona “Musha” is not.

The mobility of the Shona “Musha” may be partly explained by Rhodesia's mandate to gather native Zimbabweans into “Tribal Lands” or later “Communal Lands.” Indeed, the evolution of the Musha has begun to include orthogonal huts of pole and dhaka, sun dried brick or foraged modern materials such as old asbestos-cement panels and polythene, to accommodate western commodities (i.e. beds, furniture) acquired through contact with white, formerly Rhodesian, now

Zimbabwean, domestic employment. Yet, even the notion of “ownership” of these commodities is understood quite differently by western standards. These effects are used communally, as is their continued communal use of land.

NOTES

- ¹ Soja, Edward, “The Political Organization of Space” *Association of American Geographies*, Resource Paper #8, (1971).
- ² Blier, Sus Preston, *The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- ³ Blier, Susan, *The Anatomy of Architecture*.