not white

diversity in beginning design education

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The Permanence of Impermanence: Learning from Sukkot

abstract

Linda C. Klein

Assistant Professor of Architecture
University of Oklahoma
College of Architecture
830 Van Vleet Oval
Gould Hall, Room 162
Norman, OK 73019
405.361.5734
email: lcklein@ou.edu

The Jews have been nomads for many years of their existence. Their first flight occurred when they were forced out of Egypt and spent forty years wandering the desert. The huts that the Jews used during their exile were called sukkot and every year, during the holiday of the same name, Jews all over the world construct tents that help them remember their nomadic history and celebrate the bounty of the earth. According to the Torah, these freestanding structures must have a covering (*sekhakh)* that is made of material *that grows in the ground but has been detached from it*, like tree branches or corn stalks. The roof must be designed in such a way that it provides some protection but also allows the residents to be able to see the stars through it. Once built, families dine and, depending on the climate, sleep in their sukkot. The time they spend in their tents, looking at the stars, serves to remind them that humans are deeply connected with the cycles of the earth.

Sukkot questions two tenants of Western architectural thought: authorship and permanence. Since the institutionalization of architectural education at the École des Beaux Arts, architecture studio tends to focus on independent, personal creation. However, sukkot, as with many tent structures, are designed and erected through a collaborative process. Rather than building symbols of a single ego, the teams of both architects and non-architects built representations of communal ideas and through working together, learned skills necessary for the formation of communities. Similarly, the temporal nature of the sukkah (they are disassembled after seven days) stands in direct contrast to the Western notion that architecture is eternal, resulting in buildings that are unresponsive to changing ecological and cultural practices. Hints of the ephemeral humanize architecture by allowing it to adapt to natural cycles and changing usage patterns.

Sukkot are similar to the structures of many nomadic people, including Native Americans, Aborigines, and Bedouins. In contrast to the Western notion of dwelling, which is predicated on people's attachment to a physical place, home for these cultures is independent of site. Instead, the psychological comforts of home are provided through the rituals of construction along with the familiarity of the tent structure and its contents. The lessons of Sukkot are pertinent to architects as well as Jews; the holiday offers beginning students clues for thinking about building homes and communities in today's fast changing, increasingly mobile world.

Linda C. Klein, Associate AIA, graduated from Rice with a BA in Art and Art History and a BS in Civil Engineering. She completed her architectural education at Yale University in 2001. Since then, she has had the pleasure of both practicing and teaching at various locations. Currently, she is an assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma, where she teaches modern architectural history and theory, mechanics, and beginning design studio. Her interests include the use of photography to capture the ephemeral phenomenon of our built environment and the manipulation of media to reveal unseen layers of a place.

The Jewish holiday of Sukkot (Feast of the Tabernacles) occurs from the 15th to the 21st of Tishrei and celebrates two events: the end of the fall harvest season (during which time temporary dwellings were used to expedite the gathering of the harvest), and the memory of the booths that the Jews lived in during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness following their exodus from Egypt. Sukkot (plural) are also the name of the huts that are erected during the holiday. According to the Torah (Halachic Criteria), a proper sukkah (singular) has a roof made from unprocessed vegetative material that provides some protection but also allows the residents to be able to see the stars through it. Additionally, it must have at least three enclosed walls, for protection from the wind, stand on its own, without the help of any existing structures, and should have a height of between three feet and twenty feet. The sukkah must be large enough to accommodate the daily life of an entire family since over the seven days of Sukkot, a family eats, and if the weather permits, sleeps in their sukkah:

> "You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the Land of Egypt..." (Leviticus 23:43).

The sukkah is erected on the first day of Sukkot, and although it will be disassembled seven days later, it is always decorated with ornaments that reflect the aesthetic sensibilities of its owners.

This past Sukkot several architecture students (nine first and second years) volunteered to work with nine Hillel students on a sukkah building competition. The coordinator of Hillel and I organized the students into three teams, who, over the course of two weeks had to design a sukkah that met all of the Haladic criteria. The sukkot were also judged on their ability to educate the public about one of three main themes of the holiday: the history of Sukkot (what the holiday is, why it's celebrated, etc.), feeding and sheltering the needy, or caring for the environment. In keeping with the spirit of the holiday, the students' sukkot had to be made of materials that were either totally biodegradable or attached in such a way that after the sukkah was disassembled, the material did not have any holes or cuts and could be donated to the local habitat store. The students erected their structures in two hours, spent the entire day in their structure, and had the campus cleaned up by 10pm that evening. This one-day event introduced students to ideas that challenged their notions of the role of the architect and architecture in our society.

Sukkot asks us to work together to build a structure.

Because a sukkah requires many people to build it so that it can be completed in one day, it challenges the myth of the heroic architect. As Allsopp states:

> "In the hot-house atmosphere of a school of architecture, or in the committee rooms of a professional institute, it is only too easy to be infected with the belief that architects control the social climate in which they work. One is prone to take the biographies of the masters of modern architecture at their face value and see the architect as a god-like being ... the architect is conscious of his superior nature and his mission to mould the environment for the good of mankind."[1]

Besides having to deal with joint authorship, the haladic criteria for designing a sukkah forced the architects to incorporate the environment (for the sechah) and religious specifications into their design. They had to respond to a society, they could not "control the social climate." They also had to respond to the environment. Although sukkot can occupy any site, they tend to be more responsive to their environment than the permanent houses of Western architecture. Rather than ignoring the landscape and creating a barricade from nature, a sukkah, with its roof made of local materials woven loosely enough so that the sky is always in view, connects the dweller with the earth's daily cycles. Its architecture formed of locally

grown materials reflects the environment rather than aiming to reshape the environment into a preconceived ideal image.

Having to work within these criteria caused the students to question the commonly held belief that a work of architecture is an autonomous object, standing alone in its perfection. This idea comes from our personal experience and the way architecture is represented to us. As Beatriz Colomina suggests, the view of architecture as a still-life artwork or *'nature morte'* became significant in twentieth-century photography that omitted human life in favor of presenting architecture as an ideal, static object.[2] The sukkah is an architecture that responds to its users. As the sun rose and began to heat the campus, one group chose to add more branches to their roof. The mutability of the structure humanizes it. Since the sukkah was never conceived as an untouchable work of art, the students had no problem changing it. As in many nomadic societies, the students found that it was the act of building rather than the building itself that provided a site for social bonding. The process played a more important role than the final product.

Sukkot asks us to dwell in temporary structures.

For most people, after the seven days of Sukkot are over, they can return to a permanent home. However, there are those who cannot. Many people live in transitional housing; wars and emergencies have led to increasing incidences of people expelled from, or avoiding permanent settlement, leading to the erection of temporary and unplanned tent cities. The increased need for tents for victims is one reason to examine nomadic structures like the ones the Jews used during their exile. Sukkot reminds architects that these structures are homes worthy of their attention, which is an idea that Shigeru Ban, an architect well known for his design of paper-tube disaster relief housing used in Japan, Turkey, and Rwanda, has already embraced. As he says:

> "Refugee shelter has to be beautiful. Psychologically, refugees are damaged. They have to stay in nice places."[3]

Ban's work clearly demonstrates one of the key principles of Sukkot; home is a more complex idea than a permanent building. A home must provide both physical and psychological shelter; even when it is temporary, it should be decorated so that it comforts its occupants. Sukkot, which are built by Jews around the world, provide psychological familiarity through the ritual of building and decoration regardless of its site. These aspects have been incorporated into the design of successful transitional housing; they could be incorporated into a studio about housing.

While people seeking permanent resettlement remain an important part of global movement, contemporary mobility often involves global migrants whose occupations, curiosity, or necessities compel them to continuously move. The increasing numbers of voluntary nomads is partially caused by the decreased price of flying, increased speed of trains, and the ubiquity of infrastructure that caters to drivers of all types of vehicles.[4] These voluntary nomads need a new way of understanding home; they too could learn from nomadic societies who believe that home does not have to be associated with a specific geographic location.

For the Bedouins, the Arabian Black Tent is a reassuringly familiar dwelling that is strongly symbolic of their identity and culture regardless of its site. If we accept that home is not a fixed location, we can capitalize on some of the concepts of tent architecture. As critic Otto Kapfinger noted in 1984:

> "As primitive hut and flexible nomadic dwelling, the Yurt is an elegantly simple ideal type which reflects certain desires and theories which played a role in the beginning of Modern Architecture. Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier saw in the nomad the prototype of the new democratic man, one who represents freedom, spirituality and decentralization in principle, in contrast to the city dweller's site-fixation and social hierarchy."[5]

Fuad I. Khuri confirms Le Corbusier's assessment of nomadic politics in his book, *Tents and Pyramids.* He argues that Bedouins perceive reality as a matrix of discrete units inherently equal in value. This is the physical organization of a Bedouin encampment, composed of tents scattered haphazardly on a flat desert surface with no visible hierarchy. Yet only through their relation to each other do individual tents become a dwelling; it is the encampment or community that that is the home. Each tent is seen as one element of a complete system — a mode of weaving a life pattern.[6]

Similarly, Westerners also consider their friends and family part of their "home." Sociologists have shown that people in diaspora not only associate with neighbors in the hostlands, but attempt to maintain contacts in the homelands from which they have come. As Bhabha writes, "Immigrants construct their *cultural identities* as citizens of their host countries while simultaneously retaining strong affiliations, identifications and loyalties to the culture of their home country." This assessment is a generally held truism among the fields of sociology and anthropology.[6]

The difficulty of maintaining these social ties was one barrier to contemporary nomadism. New communication technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones are overcoming this obstacle by allowing these digital nomads to stay in touch with their loved ones. As Dr. Robbie Blinkoff, notes:

> "A class we call 'the mobiles' already exists. And the behaviors we observed illustrate a complete societal shift to a mobile way of life. It varies by geography, generation, gender and type of work, but a 'mobilevolution' is afoot."[8]

A 1999 study by the Context Institute of 144 people in seven international cities including Sydney, Beijing, Rio de Janiero, Rome, Stockholm, New York City, and San Francisco, found that mobile phones had become integrated into the lifestyles of their participants. They identified several broad shifts in thinking and action that have taken place in the late 1990s, including:

> "A new sense of "phantom proximity", which means "being alone" is no longer linked to physical space' physical proximity is no longer a barrier to forming communities, and socio-evolutionarily, the mobile lifestyle is the perfect complement to society and culture's continued shift to a modern day nomadic existence."[9]

Whether you call them mobiles or digital nomads, a term coined by Makimoto and Manners in 1997, their communication devices are similar to tents for Bedouins. In each case, these objects are understood as enablers of dwelling, not dwellings in and of themselves.

Bedouins see their tents as we see coats; each is an accessory that provides protection from the elements and can reflect your personality. Karin Harather's 1995 book *Houseclothes; on the Phenomenon of Cladding in Architecture* furthers this analogy by considering tents in a context of the wider field of fabric architecture: drapes, linings and canopies.[10] If architecture can be fabric then clothes can architecture. And, since community is created through digital devices and clothes are a signifier of identity that can travel, wearable computing should be seen as a possible "home" for the contemporary nomad.

Computer scientists at many research universities are pursuing the design of these devices. Their goal is to change the way we interact with digital technology:

> "To date, personal computers have not lived up to their name. Most machines sit on the desk and interact with their owners for only a small fraction of the day. Smaller and faster notebook computers have made mobility less of an issue, but the same staid user paradigm persists. Wearable computing hopes to shatter this myth of how a computer should be used. A person's computer should be worn, much as eyeglasses or clothing are worn, and interact with the user based on the context of the situation. With heads-up displays, unobtrusive input devices, personal wireless local area networks, and a host of other context sensing and communication tools, the

> wearable computer can act as an intelligent assistant, whether it be through a Remembrance Agent, augmented reality, or intellectual collectives."[11]

Perhaps architects should be working with these scientists, especially as these mechanisms start to create the social encounters that used come solely from the design of the built environment. Scientists are also working on embedded chips that would allow us to more easily stay in contact with our friends. The decreased size of communication devices makes them even easier to bring along; this is important for while Nomads physically travel with their friends, they are forced to connect to ours through digital technology. Yet in each case, the participant is involved in a community that is in a constant state of change as members come into or leave the virtual group and also change their actual world position.

The ephemerality of tents and the constant changing of exact location between the tents are part of the reason that nomadic communities view the world in a constant state of becoming. "Nomadology" is a term first coined by Deleuze and Guattari to describe that outlook. According to them, viewing the world from within the Cartesian schema, as composed of distinct objects arranged in space, is outdated. Instead, they propose a dynamic view of life that emphasizes the fluxes and flows of which all things are made (like the way the Internet grows).[12] Everything that exists is involved in this process of change, including architecture. In 1990, Flusser wrote that nomadology, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, marked one of the main revolutions of developed societies. In an essay *Zelt*, ('Tent') he suggested a return of developed society to nomadism through communications, a movement that he regarded as being of similar global significance to that of the original agricultural revolution.[13]

Of course, one result of communication devices is that people will stop traveling since they will be able to reach work from home. On the other hand, the "WTO estimates that, in the mid 1990s, the average value of international tourism has grown faster than world exports of all commercial services, and international tourism now represents 30% of the value of the total world export services. That is a very considerable testament to the nomadic urge."[14] In the view of two prominent computer scientists:

> "There is so much investment chasing the goal of ubiquitous digitization that it will become a reality. With it will come electronic communication that will be as universal and robust as the present-day fax –but a fax that is not just text but includes sounds, voices, photos and video. That's when geographic ties get snapped and when people become free to roam while remaining invisibly connected to all the communication networks and entertainment channels, and to every friend, relative or business contact they might want to speak to. That's when the realization will dawn on people that the have a brand new option to consider: 'Am I a settler or a nomad?"[15]

By exposing students to these issues, they can and will be instrumental in helping to answer that last question.

NOTES

1 Bruce Allsopp, *Towards a Humane Architecture* (London: F. Muller, 1974).

2 Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity : Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

3 Editors of *Time Magazine*, "Design Innovators," *Time 100: The Next Wave* (2000): downloaded from http://www.time.com/time/innovators/design/profile_ban.html on March 30 2004.

4 Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners, *Digital Nomad* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997).

5 Kapfinger, Otto. "Das Haus Als Futteral," *Die Presse (Newspaper, Vienna)* no. 18-19 (February 1984) as translated by Gregory Cowan and reprinted in "Nomadology in Architecture: ephemerality, movement and collaboration," (Australia: The University of

Adelaide, 2002).
[6] Fuad I. Khuri, *Tents and Pyramids : Games and Ideology in Arab Culture, from Backgammon to Autocratic Rule* (London: Saqi, 1990).
[7] H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
[8] Context Institute. *The (R)evolution is now: 'The Mobiles' defines an emerging wireless lifestyle*. Context-based research report, June 1999. Downloaded from http://www.contextresearch.com/context/newsroom_article.cfm?ID=30 on March 30, 2004.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Karin Harather, *Haus-Kleider: Zum Phänomen Der Bekleidung in Der Architektur*, (Vienna, Cologne Weimar: Böhlau Verlag ges.m.b.H und Co. K.G., 1995) as translated by Gregory Cowan and reprinted in "Nomadology in Architecture: ephemerality, movement and collaboration," (Australia: The University of Adelaide, 2002).
[11] Opening to the Wearable Computing homepage of the MIT Media Lab. Downloaded from http://www.media.mit.edu/wearables/index.html on March 30, 2004.
[12] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Nomadology : The War Machine*, *Foreign Agents Series* (New York, NY, USA: Semiotext(e), 1986).
[13] Vilem Flusser. "Nomaden, Zelte." *Auf, Und, Davon: Eine Nomadologie der Neunziger Jahre* 2 (1990), as translated by Gregory Cowan and reprinted in "Nomadology in Architecture: ephemerality, movement and collaboration," (Australia: The University of Adelaide, 2002).
[14] Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners, *Digital Nomad* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997).
[15] Ibid.