

2008

Drawing Culture: an architectural agenda

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Recommended Citation

Goché, Peter P., "Drawing Culture: an architectural agenda" (2008). *Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations*. 39.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf/39

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Drawing Culture: an architectural agenda

Abstract

Anthropology is the science that studies peoples past and present, their cultures, and their histories as groups. When anthropologists undertake a study of an unfamiliar culture, they typically write ethnography. Ethnographic studies look at the patterns of interpretation that members of a cultural group invoke as they go about their daily lives.

An ethnography is a highly descriptive overview of a group's knowledge, its beliefs, its social organization, how it reproduces itself, and the material world in which it exists.³ In short, ethnography is a process referred to by Clifford Geertz as "Writing Culture". The purpose for preparing ethnographic field reports is not only to describe and explain, but also to unfold a view of the world in which cultural alternatives can be measured against one another and used as a guide for the production of space (i.e. Design).

Disciplines

Architecture | Social and Cultural Anthropology

Title

Drawing Culture: an architectural agenda

Conference

33rd European Studies Conference: Anthropology



Great Feast



David Wagner



Megan Lueneburg

Introduction

Ritual is a series of actions constantly repeated. Repetitiveness serves the meaning being expressed, for if the pattern is at least generally constant we can concentrate on the message embodied in the performance. Repetition soothes us, apparently, in and by itself. Human beings rejoice in the action of patterning. Rituals are about lasting.²

– Margaret Visser

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Our engagement of constructed environments within a particular material culture is affected by the physical items associated with defining its setting. In an effort to narrow this experiential field of study, this case study assesses the Italian mealtime situation as informed by two individual student inquiries while studying in Rome, Italy. Specifically, I will discuss the cultural conditions that informed each student's summative effort in the production of a single ornamental drawing based on a particular set of Italian family customs.

As preparation for this academic exercise, the students were asked to consider various readings on Italian culture as well as the *Great Feast* – an illustration featured in the *Grandes Chroniques de France*. In addition each student was asked to conduct anthropological fieldwork and from this effort produce a set of jottings or field notes that would then inform the production of a single ornamental drawing.

Like ethnographic studies, the purpose of drawing culture is to unfold a more acute view of the world. This process of inquiry is the embodiment of an academic agenda that has to do with authenticating the customary essence of lived space and defining the criteria for making ethno-specific propositions.

The Grandes Chroniques of King Charles V

During the reign of the first French kings, a royal manuscript, *The Grandes Chroniques de France*, was published in effort to visually illustrate and chronicle royal and courtly events. It is a French translation of the Latin histories written and updated by the monks of Saint-Denis, who were, from the thirteenth century, official historiographers to the French kings. In 1364 King Charles V became King and commissioned a continuation of the *Grandes Chroniques* that added accounts written at court about his father's and his own reign. Charles V's manuscript incorporated the history of a new branch of the *Capetians*—the Valois—into the official history of the French kings at a time when the English crown was challenging the legitimacy of the Valois rulers. The addition of this new illustrated text to the king's copy of the *Grandes Chroniques* was a timely reaction to contemporary politics and a typical one for this bibliophile king.

The largest illustration in this chronicle of imperial visits is that of the Great Feast (Fig. 1). This picture is one of only two illustrations in Charles V's manuscript referred to directly in its accompanying text. The passage preceding the image of the Great Feast refers explicitly to its depiction: "And thus they went without a great hurry . . . to the large dais with the marble table and the grouping of figures and their positions were as described below and as is figured in the illustration hereafter portrayed." With the exception of a few simplifications required to depict a large crowd in a small area, the illustration conforms to the description of the diners that begins just below the picture. It records the positions of Emperor Charles IV, Charles V, and the bishops who dined with them.

The representation of the play, which fills the right side and the foreground of the illustration, was about the history of Godfrey of Bouillon and the conquest of Jerusalem. It speaks of Peter the Hermit, of Godfrey, and of the "noble knights who were at the conquest of Jerusalem." According to the chronicle, the king chose to have the story of Godfrey of Bouillon performed because he believed that there was no better example to put before the noblest men in Christendom who "were best able, ought, and should undertake such a feat in the service of God." Taken at face value, this statement suggests that the play was intended to kindle crusading fervor in those who watched it.

Mealtime Rituals by David Wagner

Paulo Parisi grew up in the 1950's and 60's, a time he described as having "excellent food." He lived with his mother and father and five brothers and sisters. His father worked for a bank and moved the family around a lot when Paulo was younger. As Paulo described, the different places they lived reflected what the typical meal would have been. In the Italian tradition, they ate what was local. At one time they lived on the coast so fish was the

predominant protein at dinner. Another town was famous for their prosciutto so in their kitchen they had a meat slicer and fresh meat on hand all the time.

When it came to preparation Paulo's mother would do most of the work. His oldest sister would help out from time to time though, but for the most part the kids were responsible for completing their schoolwork before dinner. Around 8:00 or 8:30 his mother would set the table and call everyone to dinner. The place settings were ordinary. Each evening meal, *cenare*, was consistently accompanied by news via the television. The typical meal consisted of two dishes, a pasta course and a meat course. Fresh fruits, vegetables, and cheeses would supplement the meal. His parents would often drink wine and the children water or coffee. During the interview Paulo let on that he is moderately addicted to coffee; about thirteen cups a day now. He started drinking it when he was six. It was just part of his family's mealtime ritual. After the evening meal was finished, out came the coffee maker. All the children were allowed to stay up and watch a variety show that aired after the news and coffee was had throughout. Paulo told me that he was very quiet at the dinner table when he was younger, but was always excited for the coffee and then the show.

When conceiving my drawing (Fig. 2) I first made the decision to cartoon the mealtime scene rather than produce a realistic depiction. I have had an interest in comics for a long time so it was easy for me to visualize the drawing in this way. The interview acted as the script and art direction for the drawing and the text worked as a perfect supplement to the scene. The precedent study provided the layout of the piece, which framed the illustration at the perfect size for one large panel that could tell the story.

I began the drawing by doing a very general sketch that roughly blocked in the position of the eight figures around the dinner table. I worked very quickly using ovals for the people and light lines to build up the table setting and background. From here I began to pencil in the faces paying close attention to site lines and body orientation. Arms and legs were left very gestural and there was little consideration of the table setting and no background. At this point I stopped drawing and looked critically at composition and interactions between the family members, always keeping in mind the details of the interview. After marking up the sketch much the same way you would a piece of writing I moved to trace paper. On the trace each figure was fully refined and given a unique appearance and character. Objects were placed on the table and some background details began to be considered. The most important progression at this phase was to incorporate light and shadow.

After I had achieved as much detail as I could put into the trace I scanned the image and enlarged it 200 percent and retraced and refined it on a light table. The larger scale enabled me to go into much greater detail and give a more realistic look to the people as well as the background. The other goal of this drawing was to perfect all the hard lines that would be seen in the final and block in all of the shadows. In a comic these would have been the inked lines. Once I was satisfied I scanned this drawing and reduced it back to the original size. I traced it onto the final Bristol paper and, then, set to work on fully rendering the scene in graphite.

The Platter by Megan Lueneburg

In 1968 Vera's family moved from the former Yugoslavia to Rome. Vera was very young. When they got to Rome, Italy they moved around quite a bit and then settled in 1997. They have maintained this campsite to which they refer as Monachina; a unclaimed area of land bounded by the twentieth century ring-road at the perimeter of Rome. The

camp is a network of extended family, where everyone is related to everyone in some way, and family is of the utmost importance. Shevko and Shadka, Vera's parents, split up. Shadka moved to the opposite side of the camp. Shevko's children built their houses surrounding hers. In the center there is an open courtyard. All six houses face inward on this courtyard. When dinner is prepared everyone brings a portion of the meal to the center to share. People come and go as they please. Extended relatives join for periods of time also. Though there are enough tables, not everyone sits. All courses are presented on platters with the main course of meat placed on the largest platter and usually prepared by Vera's husband, Breno. Silverware and plates are not essential, as everyone tends to eat using their fingers.

The platter has always been a staple in the Monachina way of life. Breno spoke of his mother, who lived in the former Yugoslavia and owned the largest, most beautiful, silver platter. He spoke of the weight of it, and its beautiful intricacies.

It used to be that there were never any plates. Everyone ate everything directly from the large platter, which was used for every dinner gathering. As time went on and the families moved to Rome, they adapted their eating ritual, but the platter and the informal attitude of the gathering remained. Every time I visited with the people of Monachina, I was consistently offered food and an invitation to in Italian: '*mangare, mangare.*'

The depiction of this mealtime situation (Fig. 3) was achieved by dissecting the history and characters of The Great Feast; an illustration from a French chronicle published in the fourteenth century. The characters were re-organized around an image of the platter. Each character was stripped of its crown or symbolic ornamentation. The text for this illustration was taken from my jottings recorded while at the Monachina campsite.

Summary

The project proposed, above all else, drawing as a way of gaining preliminary insight into the Italian culture. Through this exercise students newly arrived in Rome were afforded the opportunity to engage individuals or families resident to Italy. When completed, the entire set of drawings provided a range of depictions that, like *The Grandes Chroniques de France*, began to describe the evolution and eccentricities of traditional family life practices particular to the Italian culture.

The continuity of cultural conditions specific to this particular group of people are revealed by studying rituals – cyclical happenings that are part of everyday life. These rituals have been handed down through many generations of ancestry. They are based in and furthered by necessity and, perhaps, adversity. Their repetition can be easily misread as simply routine. As pointed out in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade writes:

This conscious repetition of given paradigmatic gestures reveals an original ontology. The gesture acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it repeats a primordial act.⁵

The diurnal chores of place setting and eating are essential ingredients to sustaining the lives of those involved. The customs and stories associated with this occasion are brought to the table; to the culminating ritual referred to, by these people, as "*cenare.*"

The value of this work for the field of architecture is arrived at using observation/drawing as the primary mode of study. Like the anthropologist, the architect develops an understanding of the nature of culture, not by imposing a theory, but by letting the revelation derive from the act of recording observations, drawing. Architectural research is in these terms the study of human behavior relative to their constituent surround.

¹ Great Feast. Grandes Chroniques de France. Bibliothèque Nationale

² Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) p. 19.

³ Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice*, (see Clifford Geertz in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973) p. 5.

⁴ www.escholarship.org/editions

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1959) p. 5.