

The Urban Built Environment:
A Mirror and a Laboratory Benchtop

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Introduction to Anthropology

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“Observing people’s behaviors is the poor man’s version of anthropology [...] so in a sense conducting anthropological fieldwork is part of the job description of urban architects,” said James Shen during his guest lecture on the importance of conscious design in the context of human flexibility. What made this quote as well as the entirety of the lecture highly relevant to the work of Graeber and Wengrow was precisely the ambiguity with which Shen approached the notion of “flexibility”: it transcends the immediate practical realm of adapting to an assortment of living conditions and takes on a much more complete meaning of social and political agency of the city-dwellers against a backdrop of structural cohesion that allows them to coexist in such a concentrated area to begin with.¹

The goals of the modern architect, says Shen, overlap perfectly with the forms of social liberty which can be directly translated into actions: the freedom to relocate, to exercise free will when faced with commands issued by others, and to elastically shape one’s involvements with their preferred social realities, even if that means creating them anew (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 695). Whether that realization can happen through easily-dismantlable and relocatable Plugin Homes, through protesting government-backed neighborhood relocation policies by staying put, or through creating entirely new designated areas using the mobile accordion covers, we saw that social liberty can arise in many seemingly-contradictory patterns in an urban setting.² The crucial importance of the built environment and the urban landscape on which it is located stems from all the opportunities that it generates for its inhabitants to act and react, to

¹ As a prime example we could mention the house renovation video from Shenzhen, where the homeowner voices that she associates the narrow and inconvenient pavement with more opportunities to talk to and connect with people. This analogy can then be expanded to further portray how she wanted to make a statement via returning to live at her childhood home, and how the house renovation (and James Shen’s group) provided her with the agency needed to exert this power as a full member of the highly-structured community.

² That is, agency includes both the ability to choose to engage in an activity (i.e. relocate) as well as the ability to choose not to (i.e. improvise new solutions in order to remain at one’s home when pressured to leave by the absence of government-offered infrastructure).

actively and passively make their stances noted, while simultaneously sharing membership in a robustly-structured community (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 295).

Among the interesting parallels that Graeber and Wengrow touch on is the commonly-perceived correlation between the increase in popularity of cities and the rise of the full-fledged state (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 701). While they explicitly dismiss the notion of being able to draw conclusions on societies of the past simply by observing their descendants of centuries later (let alone millennia), Shen's approach to understanding the needs and the desires of the people could better inform the criteria by which we evaluate statehood before we even apply it to any society (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 445). Sovereignty, bureaucracy and a competitive political field seem hard enough to be interpreted in the ancient Near Eastern panorama given the limited archaeological evidence, but they just as well apply to James Shen's experience with disrupting the housing market in China and the US. As such, any built urban environment of 2022 CE should not be expected to indicate what makes it different from one of 2022 BCE, but it can certainly serve as an active laboratory testbed for introducing disruptions potent enough to trigger social experiments.³

Dialing up or down certain variables that determine an individual's interaction with their built environment and its other inhabitants, be that the space needed to live a normal life or the technology to enable the continuation of a certain business routine, can go a long way towards proving that we as a people are not really "stuck". Studying the current built environment, besides from trivially offering more insight into the present of humanity, can generate ideas, some more relevant than others, which can then prevent anthropologists and historians from jumping into

³ While these perturbations can target one of the key features of statehood at the time, the Beijing Art Week provides the necessary excuse to come up with even more fundamentally extreme re-conceptions of our relationships with our physical homes.

rushed conclusions just because “there can’t be any other reasonable explanation” (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021: 43). In a similar sense, disruptions as profound as the colorful day-long takeover of normally stern city centers using Shen’s accordion-monocycle complexes indicate that the future of humanity does not hold a linear path for us doomed to continue walking until we reach it, but instead will really depend on the still-warm experimental fervor of the inhabitants of these very cities. It is a potent resource worth tapping into to better inform play, but much like other occasions in history, this play could serve as the blueprint for bigger social changes.

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