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*Function and Meaning  
in Classic Maya Architecture*

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## *Finding Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*

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Lastly, there is the problem of relating the architecture to the ancient culture, of determining its position and function in the life of the people. This, in a sense, is the ultimate goal of architectural research, and until the problem is solved, we cannot feel that the remains possess full meaning, or that they rest in their true historical setting. (Pollock 1940: 200)

**M**ORE THAN fifty years ago H. E. D. Pollock (1940) posed two important problems: how did the ancient Maya use buildings, and how did they invest them with meaning? Recent work brings us closer to solving these questions, perhaps in ways that would have surprised Pollock. In the first place, Mayanists now enjoy better “contextualization,” to use David Webster’s term. Careful, focused archaeology helps us understand the architectural energetics, ancestral memorials, lineage and site-oriented rituals, and long-term dynastic themes discussed in this volume. As William Fash stresses, expensive, deep excavation—not test pitting—allows us to study such things, although, to be sure, shallow excavations widen our sample. In the second place, fresh interpretations of glyphs and imagery enable us to consider a new set of issues, including levels of metaphor, encoding social hierarchy, performance, and the vital forces thought by ancient Maya to animate their buildings. Few contributors could have written the same essays even five years ago. Third, students of Maya architecture increasingly find themselves in dialogue with specialists from regions and disciplines with which we have had little contact. Mayanists may now draw upon innovative studies of buildings in Suffolk, Tenochtitlan, Chan

Chan, and Madagascar. Some comparisons will prove misleading or poorly conceptualized, or our information may be inadequate for the job (see Johnston and Gonlin). At the least, though, the extended range of possibilities prys us away from accustomed paths and rutted thinking.

THINGS SAID

The papers in this book go far in establishing the contours of future debate on Maya architecture. One group of papers shows how regional variation and idiosyncratic emphases interplay with broad commonalities of belief. For example, the “hearth” theme discussed by Taube appears throughout the Classic Maya region but expresses itself in a great variety of ways. Its subtle, multilayered meanings accord with the notion that “meaning is not a single or unitary thing” (Johnson 1993: 31). Maya designers, builders, and sculptors make rich and imaginative linkages of the general to the particular, or the mythological to the tangible, and then back again: a “water house” occurs both in mythological time and space and, apparently, as particular buildings at Comalcalco, Copan, and perhaps Altun Ha; a grouping of smooth cobbles is at once a heap of worn stones and the *fons et origo* of creation.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Fash and Schele document the widespread distribution of certain types of ritual building, such as “mat” or “flower houses,” whose elaborate, sculpted façades reflect their intended use.<sup>2</sup> None of these structures, however, copies slavishly from other buildings but instead uses similar elements in new combinations or, as Miller puts it, “a vocabulary that was both universally Maya and simultaneously local.”

<sup>1</sup> See Jameson (1990: 106) for comparable levels of hearth metaphor in ancient Greece.

<sup>2</sup> We have only just begun to understand such thematic buildings. Structures associated with disembodied skulls and crossbones occur in several contexts, ranging from supernatural depictions on pots (López and Fahsen n.d.: fig. 10.6) to Structure 5D-96 at Tikal (Coe 1967: 89) and probably the platforms in the Cementerio Group at Uxmal (Graham 1992: 121–133). Parenthetically, the platforms at Uxmal may have been used for specific offerings, because one glyph of uncertain context records the Yucatec word for “tobacco,” **k’u-?tso**, *k’uts*—Graham (1992: 131, B1). This recalls later practice at Coba, where a structure apparently specifies ritual offerings and their supernatural recipients—Houston (1989: 30). Similarly, “water houses” appear in a number of sites, including Comalcalco (Andrews 1989: fig. 20), unprovenanced vessel in the Denver Museum of Natural History (personal observation), El Peru and vicinity (Houston, this volume, fig. 18), Temple 11 at Copan (Karl Taube, personal communication, 1994), and Structure A-2 at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979: pl. 17). Another type would be the “Teotihuacano” or “Tula” house connected to the mythogenic “otherness” of royal families (David Stuart, personal communication, 1994). Good examples include those at Tikal (Laporte Molina n.d.: 133–148). The salient question is, Do these represent types of structures codified by the Classic Maya? William and Barbara Fash are currently working out some of these details in their research at Copan, including the detection of possible “charnel houses” and “founder’s temples” (personal communication, 1996).

Additional work needs to be done to determine where and when such buildings appear and what their local attributes might be. Research by Hansen (this volume) and others (Valdés 1992a: 28–29) indicates that some features linked to the Classic period in fact originate long before.

The themes of metaphor and personification appear throughout the volume, especially in papers by Houston, Stuart, and Taube. As in many cultures (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 22–23, 42–44; Littlejohn 1967), the ancient Maya projected the concept of “house” into many domains, often through the device of “reciprocal metaphor” (see Houston, this volume). Taube shows that the sun or moon could be eclipsed by a figurative doorway curtain; a constellation represents the hearth of a house writ large across the nighttime sky.<sup>3</sup> The motivation for such metaphoric projections is not hard to find. Familiar forms, whether of the house or human body, provide an immediate basis of ideas for organizing the world (Pearson and Richards 1994: 10). Their familiarity makes them especially suitable for “structural replication” (Vogt 1969: 571–581; Jamison n.d.: 133), which acquires force through repetition and by its intelligibility to a large number of people.

Personification, too, is seen widely in Maya architectural symbolism. The Classic Maya explicitly liken buildings to human beings and not only in a metaphoric sense. Just as people consume food, so do the heat and smoke of incense burners activate and vitalize architecture (see Stuart, this volume). To put this another way, the Maya regarded some, if not all, buildings as animate entities. In this respect, Maya buildings strongly evoke architectural concepts in southeast Asia (Waterson 1990: 115–137), where, in a “two-way mapping,” the house objectifies the body and the body personifies the house (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 43).<sup>4</sup> The fact that such parallels occur is relatively uninter-

<sup>3</sup> An inscription from Tamarindito further suggests that royal ancestors were defined in terms of “houses” (Houston 1993: fig. 4–17), perhaps analogous to the *na* or localized patrilineages of the Tzotzil Maya (Laughlin 1975: 245; Vogt 1983: fig. 6.4). In this text appear the names of mother and father, the first linked to something that can be partially deciphered as *nikte nah* (? **NIK-te na-hi**) or “flower house,” the father to the “maize” or “8 house” (**AH-?-na na-hi**). However, we do not know precisely what these terms mean: the pairing of house labels is unique to this inscription. Future research should evaluate the potential of Lévi-Strauss’s model (1987) of “house-based societies” or *sociétés à maison*. These consist of “a hybrid, transitional form between kin-based and class-based social orders” in which the “house as name, concept or building . . . (offers) . . . an image or demonstration of the unity achieved” between conflicting forces (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 8, 10).

<sup>4</sup> Africanists also emphasize the presence of “house souls,” often of a complex sort, and the wide use of body metaphors to describe house and community (Blier 1987: 118–119, 131; Griaule and Dieterlen 1954).

esting—after all, body/house metaphors are close to universal. What concerns us more are the specifics, how such metaphors relate to indigenous theories of the human body. Regrettably, our knowledge of Maya theories is poor in comparison to knowledge about ancient Nahua belief (López Austin 1988).

Other essays present a growing understanding that buildings are both receptacles for, and participants in, ritual activity. In this way, architecture serves as rather more than a billboard for emotive “key symbols” (Ortner 1973), “models for”/“models of” reality (Geertz 1973: 93; see also Jamison n.d.: 100–103, 122–124), or “canonical symbols” (Blanton 1994: 8–13), although these surely come into play. Few visitors to Maya cities can miss the obtrusive, formal emphasis on architectural verticality and social rank, palatial and social exclusivity, centralized ancestral precincts, and dynastic exaltation. The building façades discussed by Schele make bold statements about the way the world is, the way it was, and the way it should be. Nonetheless, in very practical terms, the shape and layout of buildings permit certain activities to take place. Monumental stairways, for example, do many things beyond allowing people to move up or down a building or platform. Iconographic and textual data show that stairways or terraces can display tribute, booty, and captives. By sitting at various levels, the Maya establish or confirm relative social ranking; by ascending stairways, they move back in time and retrace dynastic succession.<sup>5</sup>

Proskouriakoff (1963: 120) pointed out long ago that the Maya manipulate space in ways that can serve more than aesthetic needs. Classic buildings not only create mass but define and enclose space (see also Kubler 1985: 249). Participants in processions move through them in predetermined ways to create what de Certeau calls a “spatial story” (de Certeau 1984) that “weave(s) time and space together into a kind of narrative” (Thomas 1993: 81). The audience perceives such activities as mediated by the dramaturgical qualities, sight lines, and acoustical properties of spaces (see Upton 1979). Progressive enclosure, additional doors, corridors, and rooms change the meaning of a space by making it more difficult to get to, so that, in David Pendergast’s words (1992: 62–63), openings and plazas go from “unrestricted” to “claustral” in their layout, perhaps with implications for the “ever widening gulf between rulers and ruled” (see also Awe, Campbell, and Conlon 1991). We see this at Palenque. A

<sup>5</sup> In a sense, such stairways exemplify Anthony Giddens’s (1989: 276) notion of time/space relations, developed in turn from Heidegger’s point that “*time does not exist*” but rather “is expressed in the nature of how things are, their persistence and change” (italics in original). Stairways are places where the “flow of action”—ascent and descent—takes place in “time-space” contexts, instantiating “rules and resources which have no time-space existence (save as memory traces)” (Giddens 1989: 275). That is, action triggers dynastic memory in a publicly charged manner.

cursory “access analysis” of the “Palace”—in fact, a series of distinct structures of varying date and function—suggests that an unremarkable sector of small rooms to the southeast was the least accessible—techniques from Hiller and Hanson (1984); data from Robertson (1985a, 1985b). Presumably this pattern reflects room or building function, although, as Johnston and Gonlin (this volume) argue, we cannot glibly equate diminished accessibility with increased “privacy,” a culturally loaded term.

Another theme in the papers is the discussion of individual regal wishes in the design of buildings. William Fash demonstrates for Copan that there is much less innovation than one would think, with rulers renewing “tried and trusted religious themes” by renovating and expanding the structures that exemplify them. However, when good evidence is in place, particularly from earlier and later rulers, some patrons stick out as “visionaries,” to use Fash’s term. They cause large shifts to take place in architectural mass and orientation of site cores. Something, perhaps an impetus even greater than individual aggrandizement, made all of this activity worthwhile. Whether such changes result from the ebb and flow of dynastic interaction and symbolic affiliation remains unclear (e.g., Jamison n.d.: 105–115).

The historical setting of Maya architecture is taken up by Mary Miller (this volume). She delves deeply into the design of meaning in Classic architecture and stresses the multivocality of architecture. In terms of discourse, this means that many stories or “narratives” can be read into Maya buildings, some reporting, perhaps, on what went through the minds of the patrons in commissioning such works. Many of us believe that such stories can be convincing, even though, to some, they call for an unacceptable degree of “*verstehen* and empathy” (Watson 1991: 269). Glyphs allow us to identify patrons or “possessors of buildings,” in more precise Maya parlance. With varying success, we can place constructions within an historical context of war and alliance and a more impersonal framework of ritual, building function, and house nomenclature (see Houston, Stuart, this volume). But this should not be undertaken lightly or in a spirit of overconfidence. Glyphs offer the welcome possibility of understanding in small part historical agents and their motivations (Bourdieu 1990: 41), of seeing that, “(h)ouses are built and rebuilt by individuals . . . who have their own view of the work, even if that view is a rereading or restatement of the dominant or socially accepted view” (Johnson 1993: 32). Yet they also tempt us into making too much of our narratives. In this, Mary Miller would probably accept one aspect of the so-called postprocessualist critique, if not its other epistemological anarchies: many stories can be told about Maya buildings and why they were built, but we should not blur the distinction between multiple, ancient percep-

tions and tales of our own invention, whatever their usefulness in organizing data ( Johnson 1994: 176).

One final point. Most of the studies here examine what might be called the *architecture of expectation*, a term bearing on the difficult questions of function and meaning. The contributors study and in part reconstruct what the designers expected the buildings to signal and how they expected the buildings to function. As Webster (this volume) indicates, at stake here are, among other things, potent issues of control and power. Designers devised “dominant locales” as places “to which subjects repeatedly return” (Thomas 1993: 77) to “generate the major structural principles implicated in the constitution of different types of society” (Gregory 1989: 209). Not for a minute, though, should we believe that those expectations dominated or monopolized the use and perception of buildings: “meaning does not inhere in the structure of space: it has to be invoked in the practice of reading . . . (through) . . . a tradition of interpretation” (Thomas 1993: 76)—that is, we should not neglect the role of viewers in interpreting Maya buildings.<sup>6</sup>

Other rituals, such as ballcourt feasting, evidently took place on a planned or ad hoc basis (Fox n.d., 1996), and we may imagine many behaviors and meanings not explicitly advertised by the shape and ornament of buildings. Indeed, there is little reason to believe that structures were ritually autonomous, that continuous behaviors were restricted to a single building. Nor is there reason to think that Maya royal architecture exists apart from a “discursive field of kingship,” in which factions perceive the landscape according to their own political agenda (Duncan 1993: 247). This is where studies of artifacts (in themselves problematic) (see Johnston and Gonlin), depictions of the built environment (Houston, this volume), and shifts in architectural programs become relevant, for they suggest alternative possibilities not sketched in formulaic glyphic texts, building façades, or structure plans.

#### UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Only a deluded optimist would claim that this book addresses all there is to say about Classic Maya architecture. Hardly: for want of time, many points could not be discussed in the two days allotted for the symposium, and many

<sup>6</sup> Thomas (1993: 92) develops an intriguing argument that “the escalation of architectural complexity within the megalithic tombs was an attempt to ensure that the ‘correct’ reading was made of them.” Maya architecture, too, seems guided by a desire to reduce semantic ambiguity. Contrast the relatively spare, if physically impressive, iconography of the Pre-Classic with the explosion of building ornament in the Late Pre-Classic/Early Classic (see Hansen, this volume; also Laporte Molina n.d.: 269–278; Valdés 1992b: pls. 34–38).

others have yet to be aired in any forum. I have selected two for broader consideration: the application of Euroamerican concepts to Classic Maya architecture and the identity of Maya builders.

*Vernacular Architecture and the Classic Maya*

A very substantial body of literature exists on the subject of “vernacular” architecture, especially in England and the United States (Hall 1972; Marshall 1981). But what is vernacular architecture, and how does it apply to the Classic Maya? Many definitions, particularly traditional ones, sit firmly in the Euroamerican tradition, which defines vernacular buildings mostly in terms of what they are not: they are not created by professional architects, they are neither “high-style” nor monumental, and they do not result from individual genius (Upton and Vlach 1986: xv). Nikolaus Pevsner (1963: 15) says it all: “A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture.”

Implicit in many of these studies is the notion that “stylistic innovation starts at the top of the social scale and then ‘filters’ down” (Johnson 1993: 8) in crude, almost passive imitation of elite, high-style buildings (Hubka 1986: 427). To phrase this differently, “vernacular architecture . . . (is) . . . the local version of a widespread academic style” (Upton and Vlach 1986: xvi). But there are other, almost contradictory definitions of the vernacular that suggest a different origin for ornament and overall design. One somewhat older view stems from the perspective of partial environmental determinism: vernacular buildings respond in an immediate and direct way to local economic needs or environmental setting. The builders are often the owners, who construct their dwellings and ancillary structures with a kind of “naive spontaneity” unconditioned by cultural patterns or by long-standing mental templates or “generative grammars” of architecture (Glassie 1975; Hubka 1986: 428). Another view is more cultural and “structuralist” (in Johnston and Gonlin’s sense, this volume). The vernacular reflects a “strong popular or social identity” roughly equivalent to Robert Redfield’s “little tradition” (Redfield 1960: 42). Undiluted by “extensive outside contact,” it serves the needs of “conservative people . . . attached to older, precedented, local architecture” (Upton and Vlach 1986: xvii). A populist sensibility tends to envelop this approach. Buildings are thought to express the people’s requirements rather than the tyrannies of elite fashion and social control.

Such approaches have come in for a good deal of thoughtful criticism. Environmental determinism and its watered-down, economic cousins seem increasingly out of favor, because they ignore compelling cultural features of building design (Johnson 1993: 9–12). The view that vernacular tradition develops apart from high style, or that the vernacular responds passively to design

changes of an elite sort, fails to take into account the “variety and dynamics of societies” ( Jamison n.d.: 96–97), the great complexity of interaction between different builders, their techniques, and varied needs and motivations. Even in Euroamerica, the folk builder in a folk society isolated from “modernizing processes” seems to be a caricature (Holdsworth 1993: 102; Hubka 1984: 204). In an insightful monograph, Rapoport (1990: 17) softens the analytic distinction between vernacular and high style by suggesting a more subtle, interwoven relationship between the two. He emphasizes—correctly, in my view—the need to look at entire cultural landscapes, albeit with increasing discrimination of their parts (Rapoport 1990: 14, 18–19). This is something we have been unable to do in this book; our gaze has focused instead on the “parts” that constitute such landscapes.

Nonetheless, Rapoport believes we should maintain certain fundamental distinctions. To him, change occurs more rapidly in high-style architecture, with greater evidence of jagged discontinuities with past practice (Rapoport 1990: fig. 2.4). Moreover, we should pay attention to the difference between vernacular and “primitive” traditions. The primitive is unspecialized, homogeneous, isolated from “great traditions” (Rapoport 1969: 4). In contrast, greater specialization and heterogeneity characterize the vernacular tradition, which lies closer to high style on the continuum of building traditions. Implicit in this discussion is a connection between societal and building types. Primitive societies create “primitive” buildings, but vernacular or high-style societies do not exist *per se*. They form part of the same collectivity, and their buildings exist within the same society.

Clearly, there is something inconsistent in this formulation, which compares things (primitive, vernacular, high style) that are defined by different criteria (societal type and social station). To place these ideas on a more coherent basis, Kent (1990: 129) examines linkages between “categories of sociopolitical complexity” and the “use of space (behavior) and the built environment (cultural material),” which “becomes more segmented or partitioned as a group’s culture becomes more segmented and complex.” Broadly speaking, her “Category V” consists of peasant societies integrated into larger political and economic systems. Yet it is hard for Mayanists to draw instructive conclusions from this study. As Kent admits, her results are qualitative, with distinctions like “little/some/much” segmentation or partitioning. What is even less helpful, and somewhat surprising from a processualist, is the lack of attention to internal variability. What do we learn from the demonstration that Maya, past and present, segmented space and the built environment more than, say, the Kikuyu or Kapauku? Is it prudent to view such “traditional forms . . . (as) . . . changeless” (Upton

and Vlach 1986: xx)? Even if we look solely at “domestic” architecture, the dwellings and connected spaces that seem to grip most students of traditional building, what, in complex societies, are the varieties of such architecture, and why do they come into existence?

At the least, by using terms such as “vernacular” scholars acknowledge that social and economic distinctions within a society generate different kinds of buildings. This is useful. What is less healthy is the perpetuation of rigid distinctions between so-called high-style buildings and vernacular, “low-style” structures. Supposedly, high style is nontraditional, unresponsive to pressing local needs, uninfluenced by the “owner”; instead, high style is “young,” “nonconservative,” “unprecedented,” even nonfunctional.<sup>7</sup> I doubt that Mayanists are well served by the Euroamerican connotations of these terms or by the questionable divisions they reify (see also Webster, this volume). The available literature on vernacular buildings tends to cleave modest dwellings from palaces or “great houses” (Brunskill 1978: 22), a humble chapel from a cathedral. High-style buildings—Pevsner’s “architecture”—form the preserve of other disciplines, such as art history. For our purposes, this is poor anthropology. We need sound theory that will relate elite to nonelite architecture and establish better understandings of Maya systems of design, patronage, and construction. Performance theory may refine ideas about how behavior shapes, and is shaped by, space and its multiple, contingent definitions (Schechner 1990: fig. 2.1).<sup>8</sup> The great advantage of studying Classic Maya architecture—its historical setting and abundant documentation—also represents its drawback, for detailed evidence and particularistic explanation potentially obscure more profound truths about Maya buildings. The comparative approach will alert us to alternative perspectives and more subtle interpretations.

<sup>7</sup> Vernacular research shows a keen awareness of modern changes in labor, materials, and design. In Brunskill’s (1978: 29) terminology, “polite” architecture—an objectionable, snobbish term—has logarithmically displaced the vernacular. Such curves or thresholds are irrelevant to the Maya, where change has to be understood apart from the increasing influence of professional architects or their hunger for “internationalism” and aesthetic innovation (Brunskill 1978: 25).

<sup>8</sup> Schechner’s “performance event-time-space chart” expresses some of the nuances of performances and their shifting locales. A classification of space (e.g., “multispace”) intersects with a general kind of performance (“sacred ritual”) to define an event (“pilgrimage”). The behavioral complexity of the chart underscores the futility of attempting a simple functional classification of Classic Maya buildings. It is instructive to consider Juan Pedro Laporte’s exquisitely detailed reconstructions of palatial sequences at Tikal. Within a single class of building—the “palace”—occur numerous, shifting patterns of doorway access and room layout (Laporte Molina n.d.: 149–157), suggesting high diversity of room use through time.

There is another point to be made about Maya architecture, particularly with respect to modern examples that may elucidate past practices. Despite a smattering of work, we know relatively little about such buildings, a situation shared with other parts of Mesoamerica, where documentation is dated by concerns of another era (Beals, Carrasco, and McCorkle 1944). Compare this with the state of knowledge of historic architecture in North America. Work by Kniffen (1986) builds on decades of systematic, descriptive research. And despite a number of legitimate criticisms (Johnson 1993: 35–38; Stone 1988), Henry Glassie’s influential work on folk housing in Virginia remains a classic, at once provocative and stimulating. We are less favored in the Maya region. Amazingly, Wauchope’s (1938) monograph on “modern Maya houses” (see also Wauchope 1940) remains our basic source. Superb and pathbreaking for its time, it cannot meet—nor should it be asked to meet—modern standards of descriptive rigor and theoretical sophistication. More recent research involves ethnoarchaeological programs with a behavioral emphasis (e.g., Fauvet-Berthelot 1986: 235–263; Lee and Hayden 1988; Smyth 1991); their detail obliges localized, restricted study. In my view, there is an urgent need to prepare a comprehensive survey or atlas of indigenous Maya buildings. This is not only because present knowledge is incomplete, but because native technologies and their practitioners, ritual mediations (see Stuart, this volume), building styles, systems of labor organization, use of materials, and nomenclature are swiftly disappearing in some areas. Environmental pressures and the impermanence of Maya building materials (thatch, wattle-and-daub, wicker) mean that the buildings themselves will disappear rapidly. Standards of recording have been set elsewhere: measured, scale drawings showing structural detail and ancillary structures (Brunskill 1965–66, 1978; Mercer 1975); careful selection of study regions (Fox and Raglan 1951); attention to adequate samples, either judgmental or statistical (Johnson 1993: 24); and a sensitivity to historical and ethnic setting (Vlach 1986). This is an ambitious project that cannot wait long. If undertaken wisely, it will contribute crucial, contrastive evidence to discussions of traditional architecture.

### *The Identity of Maya Builders*

We have spoken about agency—the people who commissioned the pyramids. Next to nothing is known, however, about the individuals who actually designed these structures, although Abrams (1994: 97–101) has provided an excellent summary of possible systems of labor organization. To our misfortune, not one building has an unambiguous “name tag” denoting architectural authorship. As David Stuart shows in this volume, structures display not direct

records of building but statements of patronage, ownership, and ritual sponsorship. In fact, the limited and hedged nature of these statements almost suggests that rulers were not involved in the details of design—otherwise, one presumes, they would have let us know! The only representations of construction in the corpus of Maya art come from the Madrid Codex (Webster, this volume). Accompanying texts appear to say, *u tak' u sas k'u*: “he plasters the wall with the god’s clay,” or, more likely, “the god plasters the wall with white clay.” In either case, the construction is being done by a most unusual builder and does not bear on the status or identity of Classic architects. (Parenthetically, elsewhere in the Madrid Codex gods engage in many prosaic activities, so building is not privileged as a special, godlike activity.)

Colonial dictionaries of Mayan languages do describe builders and architects and hint at their status. Colonial Tzotzil, for example, contains expressions for “official builder,” *jch'ubajel* or *ch'ubavil*, “man who makes walls” (Laughlin 1988, 1: 201); a similar term exists in Colonial Tzeltal (Calnek 1988: table 3). However, a consideration of the term “official” in its colonial usage leads to the conclusion that it corresponds to an artisan rather than a holder of high office or an intrinsically important person. Susan Miles’s report (1957) on Colonial Pokomam occupations makes it clear that “master architect,” *ah noah*, was a skill open to all, to be lumped with masons, potters, and fisherman; strangely, though, this term was also applied to “authors.” Similar terms, assigned to builders, masons, and quarriers of stone, can be found in the “calepino”—a comprehensive dictionary—of Coto, an early Cakchiquel source (Coto 1983: 22–23, 176). Although not quite Colonial in date, being compiled from a variety of sources of varying age, the Pío Pérez dictionary of Yucatec Maya also attests to a term for “architect” or “mason,” *pak'bal*, “maker of walls” (Barrera Vásquez 1980: 626). Here, too, the feeling one gets is of skilled craftsmen not clearly linked with great learning or high status (Eaton 1991).<sup>9</sup> Earlier still, Bishop Landa comments that “common people built at their own expense the houses of the lords” (Tozzer 1941: 86, 171), an observation mirrored by a statement in a *Relación* of 1579, in which commoners were said to have “made and repaired (a lord’s) house” (Tozzer 1941: 287 ff). From such remarks, builders (or even master builders) would seem not to have been socially prominent in pre-Colonial times. Rather, they were concerned—so the sources emphasize—with the skillful shaping of stone walls into permanent constructions. The danger in using this evidence is the debatable assumption of continuity with Classic practice, al-

<sup>9</sup> See also Andrews and Rovner (1973: 91) for a specialized, possibly Late Classic tool kit. My thanks to Karl Taube for this reference.

though some data do suggest high levels of skill and presumably specialization in such activities (Woods and Titmus 1996: 487–488).

My prediction for the Classic period is this: Maya builders will probably remain as anonymous to us as the great architect of Chartres is to medievalists, although, as with some Maya sculptors, distinctive “signatures” of style and design may mark their buildings, if not in a manner that is easily verifiable.<sup>10</sup> In Gothic France, the glory of Bishop and God obscured and supplanted the architect’s identity (Stoddard 1972: 179). Among the Classic Maya, it was perhaps the centrality of gods and kings that drew a similar, concealing veil. Data on building practices, such as construction bins or segmented walls, suggest glimmerings of labor gangs; their social positions remain unknown, but it is a fair chance that they belonged to groups highly conversant with building techniques (Jamison and Wolff n.d.: 26). So here is a paradox: our volume reports in detail on the function and meaning of Maya buildings but proposes nothing conclusive about the identities of planners and builders, the architects who made new shapes out of a well-established, often ancient vocabulary of form. In the absence of such knowledge, can we speak meaningfully of royal programs, of royal intention in architectural planning and practice? Can we understand the process, the chain of decision making, by which platforms and pyramids, palaces and plazuelas were transformed from idea to material form? Can we know how architectural knowledge was transmitted, whether openly or through the “gatekeeping” of apprenticeship, in “which skilled individuals create their own competitors” (Coy 1989: 9, 10)? These and other questions await us in the next decade, when Maya epigraphy, archaeology, and ancillary fields promise to achieve a mature, self-reflective status.

### *Things to Do*

Until that time we have much to do. Architects with an interest in the physics of Maya buildings, their conflicting mass and stress, need to go beyond the early studies of Roys (1934). Broader landscapes should be incorporated into our research on individual buildings. Where possible, the symbolics of masonry and water courses deserve examination to the standard pioneered by Andeanists (Niles 1987: 207–232; Protzen 1993); work at Caracol, Belize, suggests exciting advances in this direction (Arlen Chase, personal communica-

<sup>10</sup> A sculptor at Aguateca and Dos Pilas carved glyphic finials into a distinctive “trumpet shape” (personal observation, with David Stuart). The appearance of this attribute on most sculptures of the time reflects the low number of first-rank sculptors working in this kingdom. However, the very complexity of building design, at several removes from the designer’s intention, will make it difficult to identify architectural “hands.”

tion, 1995). The politically charged issue of architectural reconstruction requires further discussion about its aims and methods—what is being said by such work, who is the expected audience, what will happen to such reconstructions through time (Fowler and Houston 1991: 63; Quintana 1992)? Epigraphers need to wring every last datum out of Maya texts about systems of building nomenclature and historical explanations for why certain structures were renovated. Iconographers, too, must reevaluate accepted ideas about building façades, as Fash and his colleagues are now doing at Copan. From this will come a heightened understanding of places as points of communication between the living and the dead or the natural and the supernatural (see McAnany, this volume; McAnany 1995: 26–55; Ray 1977: 373). Finally, we must look to other regions, other approaches, if with a utilitarian perspective: how do cross-cultural comparisons illuminate our data, and, more to the point, how do we go about discerning such parallels and contrasts in a persuasive manner? It is hard to imagine a more auspicious time to study ancient Maya buildings. May this volume express a little of that promise, and may it open new ways of looking at function and meaning in Classic Maya architecture.

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