

Zeitschrift:	Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich
Herausgeber:	Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich
Band:	- (2023)
Heft:	42
Artikel:	Furnishing the primitive hut : feeding the present with a past that has never been
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051760

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«Just like the noble savage appears as a corrective for human life in alienated modern societies, so does the primal hut represent a natural remedy for distorted architectural practice.»

FURNISHING THE PRIMITIVE HUT

FEEDING THE PRESENT WITH A PAST THAT HAS NEVER BEEN

Noé Lafranchi

In this text, I want to explore the concept of the «Urhütte» as a colonial artifact. I therefore try to reflect on how different versions of its narrative are entangled with the cultural practice of colonialism. «Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space». (1) As an eerie slogan, this seemingly unrelated quote by Mies van der Rohe will loom in the background of this work. By giving a form to some humans' will, architecture gains the power to confirm and naturalize this will in turn. It is clear that the ways of building and dwelling are always tied to a social hierarchy. I wanted to understand how the cultural narratives of a presumed primal hut contribute to the construction of the imperial hierarchy between a supposedly moderate European culture and a temperate, primitive tropicality in the colonies. Such a hierarchy distinguishes between «civilised» and «wild indigenous» worlds and explicitly supports a dehumanizing agenda of oppression and exploitation. The inspiration for this research is indebted to a side note by Dr. Hollyamber Kennedy in her seminar «Unsettling Territories — Landscape and the Climates of Colonization». Most primary sources of this text stem from a time where slavery is just about to be abolished in the UK and the US, where colonized nations are experiencing intense oppression and exploitation worldwide, where the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace is consolidating the cultural power of the industrial nations, where the concept of natural selection and the evolutionary theory is gaining momentum and where the main building of ETH is built by Gottfried Semper. The text you are reading now, however, is written in a time that keeps on building on all of this — where structural and everyday racism are still at the heart of our society, and imperial practices have all but seized to be. It is urgent political work to identify and unlearn racist undercurrents of our cultural memory, and I am writing this in the hope of contributing to a critical reading of the concept of the «primitive hut».

The narrative of the primal hut is probably the most common and persistent founding myth of Western architecture. The first recorded account we know today is written by Vitruvius and dates back roughly 2000 years. It wasn't until the 18th and 19th centuries, however, that the concept was embraced by a broader architectural discourse.

As an idealized theoretical framework, the primal hut represents the embodiment of a supposed essence of building, a kind of elementary architectonic truth — usually boiled down to a roof, walls, a mound and a fireplace. As a romantic myth, it depicts the imaginary societal origins of architectural practice: it is speculated what natural constellations must have led human beings to build this hut and thereby gradually transition from a wild towards a civilized existence. This view assumes that the first hut marked a point of departure from a presumably primitive, natural origin towards the development of a civilized culture. Under the guise of a technical discourse, this often seduces architects into anthropological speculations about ancient human societies. The mythical narrative is therefore not only equipped with the four elements of roof, wall, mound and hearth, but is additionally furnished with another element: first man. The ideal savage is the necessary literary item with which the mythical hut is equipped. We know other versions of such noble savag-

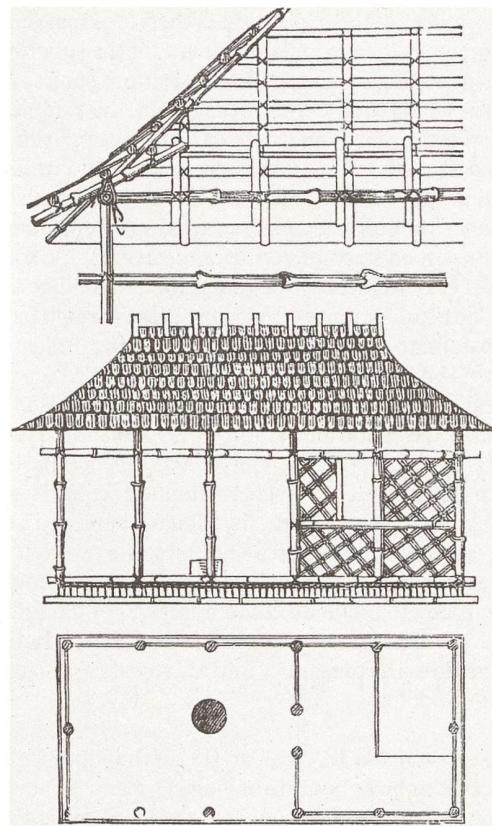
es from Huxley's «Brave New World», Rousseau, the «Avatar» movies, «Tarzan» and «Pocahontas», as well as from companies like the Body Shop that are advertising with indigenous people from the Amazon. As Joseph Rykwert writes in «Adam's House in Paradise», this natural man is imagined to be just as pure, natural and primitive as the architectural form he brings forth: He is perfect because he is primitive. Guided by elementary principles and needs, this mythical figure is himself archetypal. He is portrayed as untainted by civilization, set in an ancient, mythical time — a time when Prometheus brought fire to the earth, when language was invented and man lived in harmony with nature (2). It is no surprise then, that his creation, the primal hut, radiates an irresistible appeal of the archaic, of elementary needs and pure principles.

Just as unsurprising is the continuous reappearance of a first hut, serving as an introduction to theoretical treatises on architecture from the 18th century onwards. Presented in the introductory parts of architectural treatises as a kind of rhetorical, literal origin — the hut serves as a pure, natural basis upon which arguments can unfold and develop. Just like the noble savage appears as a corrective for human life in alienated modern societies, so does the primal hut represent a natural remedy for distorted architectural practice. Le Corbusiers «Vers une architecture» starts with such an anthropological excursion into the workings of an ideal savage (3). Also Laugier, who has become one of the main references concerning the primal hut, is writing an introduction to «An essay on architecture» about the primal hut. He describes the lush life of his first man, who is essentially lying in the softest lawn on the brightest clearing, next to the most beautiful river, before being urged by a sudden rain storm to build a roof. (4) Placed in such a natural setting, the conception of the hut, as well as its structure, appear as an invariable law of nature. The frontispiece of the text underlines this motive of natural origin: a personification of architecture is sitting on leftovers of Corinthian columns, pointing back towards a roof structure made of branches (fig. a). Other accounts assume that animals were actually the first masters from which man has learnt to build, before overcoming these masters. Also for Frank Lloyd Wright, these first builders belonged to a natural rather than a cultural kind — swinging from tree to tree, «insured by the curl at the end of his tail» before settling in their first huts. (5) Both by means of vocabulary and rhetoric, most of these authors are clearly locating the primal hut and its makers in the realm of nature rather than civilization. The card of the primitive is then played to either argue for romanticized purity or primitive backwardness.

Also, at the «Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations» in 1851 which took place in the Crystal Palace, a model of such a hut was exhibited. Before working out its relation to this text, it is important to introduce the Great Exhibition. While every nation was invited to contribute national booths with «wonders of wealth and industry» (6), this world fair was generally planned to demonstrate the power of the British Empire in the international context. Goods displayed ranged from industrial machines like the first safety elevator by Otis or the first serial printing machine, to houses for the working class and stolen cultural artifacts from the respective colonies.



(fig. a) Allegorical Vitruvian hut — frontispiece of «Essai sur l'architecture», 2nd ed., 1755, engraving by Charles Eisen



(fig. b) Caribbean bamboo hut — introduced as Vitruvian hut in Gottfried Sempers «Der Stil», 1860



(fig. c) A God-given ideal: little angels musing on drawings of ancient Western architectures

On the one hand, the exposition is therefore marked by an ambition to produce popular evidence for the superiority of Britain in relation to other industrial Nations such as France, Belgium or Germany. On the other hand, the exhibits from the «Foreign and Colonial Departments» support a global imaginary based on a world clearly divided into civilized industrial nations and savage indigenous.⁽⁷⁾ In this scheme, the colonized cultures are portrayed as behind, primitive and consequently in need of civilizing measures. A contemporary observer writing for «The Cyclopedie — The Crystal Palace and its Contents» describes these foreign «articles [as] substantially the inferior fruits of human industry».⁽⁸⁾ Along this line, an exhibited plow, the type of which is used in a rural Indian region, is compared to the ones used by the Romans or the Saxon ancestors of the English.⁽⁹⁾ Here, it is important to point out the violence of this comparison, in order to understand how such a statement is effectively contributing to a colonial hierarchy. The Romans and also the Saxon ancestors are cultures dating back a couple of thousand years, whereas the tools of the colonized people that are compared to them are contemporaries of the industrial nations. In this sense, the comparison places the Indian culture outside of the present — into a historic past that has yet to (be) develop(ed).

In his essay «On the Tropical Origins of the Alps», Bernhard Schär explains how the anthropologist Johannes Fabian uses the concept «denial of coevalness» to describe this problematic aspect of anthropology: «The encounters between anthropologists and the people they observe must necessarily take place within the same timeframe — anthropologists and their objects of enquiry are thus «coeval» in the field. In anthropological writing, however, the people studied by anthropologists become the «other». They are relegated to a different period from that of the observing anthropologist and his or her readers. While the former come to represent the static, the «backward» or the «primitive» anthropologists and their readers come to represent the present, the evolving, the modern and cultivated».⁽¹⁰⁾ A «denial of coevalness» then represents the refusal of acknowledging that some things or peoples are of same age and duration — that they are part of a common timeframe. A parallel trajectory of progress shared by both cultures is denied. Thereby time becomes a central cultural power mechanism. In this light, the colonial project is portrayed as a Western civilizational measure through which presumably inferior cultures are developed. In «Orientalism», Edward Said shows how this «backward opposite» of an enlightened West is ideologically sustaining colonial oppression. Knowledge thereby becomes «both a product and a pillar of colonial power».⁽¹¹⁾

Reading quotes from the time of the Great Exhibition, it becomes painfully obvious how these authors support this exact worldview: exhibits of the colonies merely become «the primitive elements out of which the advanced nations have elaborated their gorgeous and graceful, useful productions. The most polished nations may in them trace their own perfection backward to its source».⁽¹²⁾ By means of such a linear narrative of time and progress, a violent hierarchy between civilized and savage, between modern and primitive is constructed.

Now, how does this align with the «Urhütte»? In 1851 Gottfried Semper makes a spectacular find at this very exhibition. Among the exhibits of the «Foreign and Colonial Departments» which I referred to before, Semper encounters the model of a Caribbean bamboo hut and realizes that he is actually looking at the «Urhütte»^(fig. b). Semper seamlessly integrates drawings of it in a paragraph about ancient Greco-Italian architecture in «Der Stil», introducing it as an example for a «Vitruvian primitive hut with all its elements preserved».⁽¹³⁾ In «Der Stil» as well as in «Vier Elemente der Baukunst», the motif of origin and purity conveyed by the «Urhütte» become central to his argument. Just like the plow, the Caribbean bamboo hut becomes an artifact which is equated with an ancient, partly even mythical past of his own culture. In this denial of coevalness Semper does not only re-contextualize the actual hut itself, but also the people that made the hut and dwell in it. Associated with the hut, they are assigned the role of the preconscious noble savages. It might not be intended, but the resulting colonial scenography is dehumanizing.

It must be said: seeing this as unintentional is a disproportionately generous reading. In «Vier Elemente der Baukunst», for example, Semper so frequently engages in racist arguments about the primitivity and crudity of tribes, about the craft of peoples that are presumably still in a childlike state, that one is left wondering whether anyone teaching this has actually read it.⁽¹⁴⁾ These statements are violent and of course develop into material consequences — but they fall in line with the general narrative of the primal hut. Already Vitruvius assigned the primal hut to what he thought to be barbarian primitives. Nevertheless, Semper's drawings depicting the Caribbean bamboo hut are a standard work for architectural education, usually shown right after or before Laugier's frontispiece representing the mythical first hut.

On a side note, a similar denial of civilization is encapsulated in debates about myths claiming that extraterrestrial aliens — rather than local people — must have been responsible for refined ancient architectures outside the European continent. The radicality of such speculations is revealed only at a second glance. But for a culture which is used to fashion itself as the conveyor of civilization, it must easily seem more plausible that aliens, rather than a local civilization, are responsible for sites such as Sacsayhuamán or Teotihuacán.

But what about local European huts? In «Poetry of Architecture», John Ruskin — writing under the pseudonym of Kata Phusin — claims that the chalets and cottages of European peasants express faith and an ideal national character. While foreign huts are contextualized as evidence for the inferiority of the corresponding culture, Western cottages are introduced as evidences for a faithful, noble character of the European nations past. «Kata Phusin» translates as «according to nature». Consequently, he claims that the forms of cottages are derived from the naturally moderate European environment which has also formed its faithful peasants.⁽¹⁵⁾ The appeal of historic Western architecture seems God-given^(fig.3). Along the lines of the van der Rohe quote at the beginning of this text, Phusin assumes that architecture reflects the will of the builders and, further, that

the builders themselves mirror their environment. Phusin does not relate them, but the European cottages could easily be contemporaries of the Caribbean bamboo hut. However, mirroring the idealized European environment, both people and huts are valued more than those in the temperate tropical regions. One is assigned to a noble present, the other to a static, primitive past out of time.

One of the most extreme accounts of the myth of the primal hut is to be found in Viollet Le Duc's «*Histoire de l'Habitation Humaine*», published in 1875. Running exactly in the vein of this discussion, the protagonists Doxi and Epergos are travelling in space and time. In a forest, they come across the Nairriti, a tribe of savages with yellow skin, sparse hair, warts and hooked nails. Barely recognizable as human beings, they are eating raw reptiles, living in mud and misery. They clearly occupy a low rung on the evolutionary ladder. As a storm is plaguing them, Epergos decides to help: He builds a shelter made of saplings for them. (16) This civilizing measure is of course well received by the otherwise helpless primitives who were stuck in the dawn of consciousness. How could one read this story other than in the light of a colonial order? When studying different versions of the primal hut, it becomes clear that these references are always tied to a social agenda. What begins as a technical discourse on building practice, is actually an anthropological one. Thereby, it doesn't seem to matter that the authors feed their arguments with a speculative past which has never existed. Again: It is evident that the ways of dwelling are informing a social hierarchy. We find this confirmed if we go back to the Great Exhibition, in order to see what the contemporary visitors had to say about dwellings of indigenous people. The writer praises the «capacity of the North American Indian to adopt our usages» concerning housing, thereby seizing to be «wild». (17) The adoption of a Western way of living is introduced as a memorable marker of progress and civilization. Different Western conveniences this indigenous person seems to use, such as tinder boxes, cooking utensils, an easy chair, a modern bed next to the hammock, are minutely listed. The writer then concludes that «[t]his little Indian picture of civilised barbarism is a lesson that should be perpetuated [...], deposited in the British Museum after the Exhibition is broken up.» (18)