Space, place and meaning in northern riverain Sudan

by

Amira Omer Siddig Osman

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Philosophiae Doctor (Architecture)

Faculty of Engineering, the Built Environment and Information Technology

University of Pretoria

Supervisor: Prof. K. A. Bakker

May 2004
The sea [river]*

Tonight my family greet me
The spirit of my forefathers emerges from the dreams of the river
And from the night of the sky

The city

I will return Sennar……
Open – guards of Sennar – for the one who is returning tonight – the gates of the city
Open – for the one who is returning tonight – the gates of the city
Open the gates of the city
Are you a Bedouin?
No.
Are you from the land of the Africans?
No.
I belong to you
A lost one returning
Singing in one tongue
Praying in another

I belong to you
Your pain is mine
My spear is yours
A pagan who worships the land
A blind Sufi who worships miracles and the fire of the God

The dream

A dream? An imaginary tale? Truth?
What am I without this sound – this symbol?
It creates me
I create it
On the surface of a city – under the sun of the night – and a deep love

This study is dedicated to the Sudan – a broken country – in the hope for unity and peace

*The Sudanese refer to the River Nile as the sea.
These are excerpts from the poem, The return to Sennar, by Mohammed Abd AlHay, Al A’mal al Shi’riyya alkamila, 1999, Cairo, Markaz aldirasat al sudaniyya.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to

Prof. Karel Bakker, my supervisor – I have learnt much from you through this process.

My father, Prof. O.S. Osman, for consistently reading my rough notes with the same sincerity as he would have a more articulate document – for continuously providing me with material that I requested – for never failing to encourage me through text messages, e-mails and phone calls to: ‘Keep working on your Ph.D.’!

All the staff at the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria, for their continued support.

Prof. Schalk Le Roux.
Prof. Roger Fisher.
Gus Gemeke for trying to make me a ‘literate architect’.

The International Affairs Office, University of Pretoria for the bursary I obtained to travel to Bergen – the trip was essential to my study.

The Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Bergen.
Prof. Anders Bjørkelo – for amazing support and assistance.
Prof. O’Fahey – for access to your private library and incredible conversations.

The Department of Geography, University of Bergen.
Dr. Vibeke Vågenes.

Prof. (’ami) Ahmed El Tayib Zain El Abideen – though you are no longer with us, your ideas still motivate me.
Dr. Khidir Abd AlKarim– you acted as guide on my trips to the archaeological sites in the north – you were able to spark vivid images of life in ancient Meroe that persisted in my thoughts.

My family and friends, who not only provided moral support, but also unwittingly gave me ideas for this study through our conversations.
Sarah – for being there.

Deborah Kirkman for your valuable assistance.
Hamid ‘AbdAllah for help with language and translation.

My mother, Mama Asia and umi Fatima, my grandmother, whose house in Shendi, Josph Alshajara, inspired me!

BASHIR – FOR EVERYTHING!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 THE MAIN HYPOTHESIS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 THE DELIMITATIONS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 THE DEFINITION OF TERMS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 THE SOURCES, THEIR TREATMENT AND INTERPRETATION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 THE SPECIFIC BASIS OF EACH SUB-PROBLEM</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9 THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE RESEARCHER</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 2: PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF ARCHITECTURE</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 SUB-PROBLEM 1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 HYPOTHESIS 1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 METHODS, SOURCES AND SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.1 Eco-systems of paradigms</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.2 Dialectic processes, absolutism and relativism</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.3 Phenomenology of the body</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.4 Recapitulation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 SOURCES, LANGUAGE, CLASSIFICATION AND INTERPRETATION</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.1 Information sources</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.2 Language</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.3 Artefacts and their classifications</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4 The origins of artefacts</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.5 More on classification – the concept of multiple characteristics</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.6 Interpretation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.7 Signs, symbols and interpreters</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.8 Recapitulation</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 INTERDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATION: THE VALIDITY AND DIFFicultIES OF USING A VARIETY OF SOURCES TO UNDERSTAND ARCHITECTURE</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.1 The Architecture/Culture/Environment dialect</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.2 Perception of climate</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.3 Perception of landscape</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 ARCHITECTURE DEBATED</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.1 Vernacular architecture</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.2 What is beauty?</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.3 African architecture</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.4 African spirituality</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.5 A Sudanese idiom</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 A RE-DEFINITION OF ARCHITECTURE</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 3: AN ECO-SYSTEMIC CONSTRUCT OF NORTHERN RIVERAIN SUDAN</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 SUB PROBLEM 2</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 HYPOTHESIS 2</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 3</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 THE CONTEXT: ITS HISTORY AND ITS VALIDITY AS AN AREA OF STUDY</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 RECURRING THEMES IN THE LITERATURE ON THE REGION</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.1 Social conscience, religion and ethics</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.2 Elaborate social interaction systems</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4: PEOPLE AND PLACE: THE IDENTITY OF THE REGION THROUGH SELECTED ARTEFACTS

4.1 SUB PROBLEM 3
4.2 HYPOTHESIS 3
4.3 OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 4
4.4 GENDER ROLES AND BODY IMAGES
4.5 DRESS FORM AND MEANING

4.5.1 Conformity, identity and group affiliation
4.5.1.1 Conformity – albas al bi’jib al nas
4.5.1.2 Identity – al shilookh
4.5.1.3 Group affiliation
4.5.2 Clothing as environmental control
4.5.3 Sutraa and hijab: the tob
4.5.4 Wrapping containers, wrapping bodies
4.5.5 Dress forms: history and origins
4.5.6 Attitudes to mechanization and material as economic currency
4.5.7 Clothing and associated meanings
4.5.8 Clothing and national identity

4.6 CLOTHES, BUILDINGS AND SPACE USE

4.7 DETERMINANTS OF HOUSE FORM AND LAYOUT

4.7.1 Social structure and spatial articulation: hierarchical differentiation in the physical environment – changes through time
4.7.2 Social themes concerning gender roles and their impact on house layout
4.7.3 Connotations of the word bayt
4.7.4 Privacy and the individual’s use of space
4.7.5 Time as a structuring element in place making – nomadic cycles
4.7.6 The cardinal directions and spatial perception
4.7.7 Symbolic relationship between burial and dwelling
4.7.8 The courtyards, the streets and the public spaces

4.8 SHAYKHS, VILLAGES, TOWNS AND TOMBS

4.8.1 Islam and Sufism
4.8.2 Bearers of the new religion, Nile dwellers and teachers of Islam
4.8.3 The Nuclei of Urban Centres: the Religious Centres
4.8.3.1 al-Dammar
4.8.3.2 Hillat Khojali
4.8.3.3 Wad Hassuna
4.8.3.4 al-Fijayja
4.8.3.5 al-Fara’al-Qubba
4.8.3.6 Kadbas
4.8.3.7 Um Dubban
4.8.3.8 al-Sanniyya
4.8.4 Descriptions of religious centres

4.9 OMDURMAN

4.9.1 The morphology of Omdurman compared to the Medina typology
4.10 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 5: MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE: THE INTANGIBLE CONSTRUCT

5.1 SUB PROBLEM 4
5.2 HYPOTHESIS 4
5.3 OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 5
5.4 THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MEANING OF A PHENOMENON
5.5 SOCIAL SYSTEMS
  5.5.1 The Fareeq community network
  5.5.2 The nuclear family
  5.5.3 Segregation of the sexes
  5.5.4 Personal appearance as a form of gender differentiation
  5.5.5 Milestones and activities
  5.5.6 Social sanction – maintaining social order
5.6 ECONOMIC SYSTEMS
5.7 STATUS AND POWER SYSTEMS
  5.7.1 Kushite and Meroitic eras
  5.7.2 Christian era
  5.7.3 Arab penetration
  5.7.4 Funj era
5.8 RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS
  5.8.1 Protection from the spirits
    5.8.1 i) The Quran
    5.8.1 ii) White and shiny things
    5.8.1 iii) Bakhour incense/substances of strong smell or taste
    5.8.1 iv) Loud sounds
    5.8.1 v) Sacrifices and food types
    5.8.1 vi) Protection in numbers and words
  5.8.2 Rituals
    5.8.2 i) Visits to burial places
    5.8.2 ii) Flags and colours
    5.8.2 iii) More on colour
    5.8.2 iv) Rituals at the river bank
5.9 APPROPRIATION OF SPACES FOR RITUALS
  5.9.1 Death
  5.9.2 Marriage
  5.9.3 Religious ritual and corresponding space: the halaqa
  5.9.4 Zar
5.10 KNOWLEDGE AND CREATIVE SYSTEMS
  5.10.1 Attitudes to knowledge and creativity
  5.10.2 Literature
  5.10.3 Language and words
5.11 THEMES AND PATTERNS THAT DETERMINE PLACE-MAKING ACTIVITIES
  5.11.1 Cultural space/natural space
  5.11.2 Levels of control/Agents of control
5.12 INTANGIBLE VALUES AND PHYSICAL/SPATIAL IMPLICATIONS
  5.12.1 Origins of built artefacts in the northern riverain region
  5.12.2 Intangible/abstract imitation of original forms
5.13 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 6: A THEORETICAL, INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF SUDANESE ARCHITECTURE

6.1 SUB PROBLEM 5
6.2 HYPOTHESIS 5
6.3 OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 6
6.4 TOWARDS AN INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK
6.5 A COMPARISON BETWEEN CULTURES OF VARIOUS HISTORICAL ERAS
6.6 AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF SUDANESE HISTORY
6.7 NORTHERN SUDAN IN THE CONTEXT OF SUDAN AND AFRICA
6.8 SUDANESE ARCHITECTURE
6.9 AN ECO-SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF SUDANESE ARCHITECTURE
6.10 CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 7: RECAPITULATION, ACHIEVEMENTS, DELIMITATIONS AND COUNTER-ARGUMENTS, CONCLUSION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

7.1 RECAPITULATION
7.2 ACHIEVEMENTS
7.3 DELIMITATIONS AND COUNTER-ARGUMENTS
7.4 CONCLUSIONS: INTERFACE: ISLAM MEETS AFRICA
7.5 OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

LIST OF REFERENCES

SUMMARY

Afrikaans

Arabic

GLOSSARY

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1 Diagram generated by the author from writing of Klinck
Figs. 2.2 and 2.3 Rudimentary structures in the Gezira region, the Sudan
Fig. 3.1 Nubia and Kush
Fig. 3.2 Historical episodes
Fig. 3.3 The three Christian kingdoms
Fig. 3.4 Rough boundaries of the Sudan
Fig. 3.5 Map from Daly and Forbes
Fig. 3.6 A diagrammatic representation of the region under study and its surroundings
Fig. 3.7 Goods being traded to and from Shendi
Fig. 3.8 Trade routes between the major towns of the northern Sudan
Fig. 3.9 Routes of Muslim penetration into the Sudan
Fig. 3.10 Unidentified Sudanese man and woman in 1920
Fig. 3.11 Man and woman in traditional attire
Fig. 3.12 A typical pattern in house design: qurfatayn makhloofat
Fig. 3.13 A modern interpretation of the qurfatayn makhloofat
Fig. 3.14 Old Shendi house
Fig. 3.15 Indoor rooms/Outdoor rooms in a Shendi House
Fig. 3.16 Sun directions and shadow pattern on a summer morning
Fig. 3.17 The cardinal directions and associated symbolism
Fig. 3.18 A typical northern Sudanese grave
Fig. 3.19 Comparison between the morphology of Sudanese towns and villages and that of other Muslim cities
Fig. 3.20 The same outside space becomes a series of different settings
Fig. 4.1 and 4.2 Places mentioned in the text: map of North East Sudan
Figs. 4.14 & 4.15 Villages on the Khartoum-Shendi route
Fig. 4.16 Khalwa boy dipping a reed pen into ink for writing sections of the Quran on a loh (wooden board)
Fig. 4.17 Dervishes in a procession in Khartoum
Fig. 4.18 "The domed gubba and minaret of Sheikh Gharieb Allah"
Fig. 4.19 Qubba of Shaykh Idris wad Arbab
Fig. 4.20 Mahdi’s Tomb, Omdurman
Fig. 4.21  The Khalifa House  
Fig. 4.22  The Qubba viewed from the roof of the Khalifa House  
Fig. 4.23  Morphology of the city of Omdurman during the Mahdiyya  
Fig. 4.24  Aerial photograph of Omdurman taken around 1930  
Fig. 4.25  Aerial photograph of al Fashir taken in 1916  
Fig. 5.1   The Fareeq within a village setting  
Fig. 5.2   The movement patterns of women in a neighbourhood.  
Fig. 5.3   Overlaps between the different age groups  
Fig. 5.4   The two dimensions of status during the Funj era.  
Fig. 5.5   Flags at a graveyard  
Fig. 5.6   Flags at a celebration of Moolid  
Fig. 5.7   Painting by Ahmed Shibrain  
Figs. 6.1 & 6.2  The topography of Meroe and the layout of the town  
Fig. 6.3  Castle at Meroe from the later Funj era  
Fig. 6.4  Church in Old Dongola

LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.1</td>
<td>Constituents of the tangible culture of a people.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.2</td>
<td>Codes that make up a cultural context.</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.3</td>
<td>Determinants of form, organisation and space use.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.4</td>
<td>The two forms of social structure and their characteristics.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.5</td>
<td>The three domains of dwelling and agents of control.</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>Historical timeline.</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Gender differences (Vagenes, 1998: 92).</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2</td>
<td>Gender perceptions, roles and social/cultural domains present in the northern riverain area.</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.3</td>
<td>Comparison between Omdurman and other African cities influenced by Islam.</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1</td>
<td>Tangible and intangible culture: Construct of aspects of culture relevant to the context, explored through various themes and patterns.</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.2</td>
<td>Schema of the relationship between this world and the other world: based on Levi-Strauss in Leach (1974: 76).</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.3</td>
<td>Schema representing the relationship between this world and the other world for the Northern riverain Sudanese people.</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.4</td>
<td>Levels and control in the northern Sudanese environmental setting.</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.5</td>
<td>Origins of built form according to Quatremère de Quincy.</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.1</td>
<td>A comparison between cultures of the different eras in Northern riverain Sudan.</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.2</td>
<td>Space and place in northern riverain Sudan: a framework for teaching and research.</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.1</td>
<td>Sub-problems, hypothesis and outcomes.</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.2</td>
<td>Themes particular to the northern riverain context and aspects for special consideration.</td>
<td>189-90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>