CHAPTER 1: THE STUDY PROPOSAL – THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

1.1   THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The main problem to be addressed is the formulation of a suitable theory base and the subsequent construction of an eco-systemically based interpretative framework, intended to be a relevant foundation for future analysis of the architecture of the Sudanese northern riverain region and for architectural education in the Sudan. This provisional framework requires the identification and articulation of an appropriate philosophical approach, and an eco-systemically based, interdisciplinary description and analysis of tangible and intangible culture prevalent in paradigmatically bound epochs in the identified region – the case study.

1.2   THE MAIN HYPOTHESIS

A more probable and relevant interpretation of the architecture of the Sudanese northern riverain region will be achieved through the construction of an eco-systemically based interpretative framework that incorporates essential and relevant dimensions of the tangible and intangible culture of the region, that includes inter-disciplinary knowledge fields, that acknowledges the complexities of interpreting a vernacular architecture, and that addresses inadequacies of, and fills *lacunae* in existing architectural historical research and architectural approaches to the interpretations of place.

1.3   THE DELIMITATIONS

The area under investigation extends along the Sudanese Nile valley from the northern border with Egypt to the town of Sennar on the Blue Nile and Kosti on the White Nile, south. This is inclusive of the Gezira area between the two Niles. This falls within the regions of the current political sub-divisions of Northern Province as well as El Nil, Khartoum, White Nile and Blue Nile Provinces.

There is no specific time limit to the study and no chronological order in the design of the thesis. Ideas are freely borrowed from different eras to examine the set hypothesis. This is seen as an appropriate approach, as the intention is to use existing documentation on different eras to achieve an understanding of the context as it is today. In fact, the thesis aims to reformulate the approach to the study of the

history of the region, as conventional approaches are seen to focus too much on specific historic incidents and not so much on periods of transition.

The artefacts to be examined will be selected in terms of their relevance, at the discretion of the author and are not intended to be exhaustive. The attempt is to use artefacts that are representative of various characteristics of and recurring themes pertaining to the context. Sudanese sources will be used as much as is feasible.

The built environment is looked at in its totality rather than as individual buildings as is the approach in studying institutionalised architecture.

1.4   THE DEFINITION OF TERMS

An eco-systemic approach:

An approach that permits placing an artefact within a constructed hierarchy of a perceived total realm. This approach is accepted as prevalent and valid. It pertains to eco-philosophy as a way of thinking. It acknowledges the interconnectedness of things and ideas. The significance of the artefact is abstracted into an association with meaning and the subjectivity of the interpreter is acknowledged.

Artefact:

This refers to any cultural agent within the socio-cultural realm. For the purpose of this study the term is not restricted to mean a physical object[i] but has been expanded to include values, ideas, emotions, rituals, social practices and linguistic agents that are explored, eco-systemically, within their contextual settings. An artefact acquires meaning, that is, it is interpreted as standing for something other than itself. Signs[ii] indicate a perceived quality, thus, any artefact can act as a sign depending on the context and social interpretation.

Space:

Where things exist and move. The undomesticated natural environment, geographic and natural features which may have a sense of 'place' or not. Space is associated

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[i] The author is aware that this terminology is controversial, but it is an approach to intangible heritage accepted by various researchers, which the author is partial to. The relevance of this working definition to the specific case study becomes apparent through this document.
[ii] Signs can be realised in symbols, which tell about their objects (Vagenes, 1998: 151). Symbols have learned meanings within a particular cultural context (Broadbent, 1980, 3).

with a lack of intimacy. The perception of time and space are strongly related, as well as elements of natural landscape.[iii]

Place:

Where the natural setting is distinct through environmental features or human intervention. Where people have inhabited space. Where a space has acquired social, spiritual, functional significance to a people. Where a space is marked by some quality or identity that distinguishes it from other spaces. A location that encourages dwelling, in a broad sense of the word. Place can be determined by how people interact with landscape and geography. It is the relationship between man and nature. It also relates to the degree of control and territorial behaviour of people towards space or a particular landscape (physically or socially).

Meaning:

This comprises two facets: The first is the shared repertoire of significance, importance or quality attributed to an artefact. The common understanding of the symbolism of artefacts creates the cultural identity of a community. In semiotic terms this is an interpretative community, sharing the same codes. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge the meanings read by the interpreter or researcher, as these may not necessarily coincide with those of the community under study. Some attributes of the context are seen as essential and others as incidental. Meanings read by the author no doubt reflect the author's cultural framework and experience. Meaning is a matter of social definition. Interpretation or 'meaning-making' includes subjective processes as a part of the academic enquiry.

1.5   THE SOURCES, THEIR TREATMENT AND INTERPRETATION

The data will comprise historical, archaeological, anthropological, folkloric and sociological studies carried out in Sudan, as far as possible by Sudanese, but not restricted to that. The data will be collected from reputable sources. Artefacts will be studied from images and descriptions in reliable documentation.

[iii] Expressed by Motloch as 'wilderness'. The same author also writes: "The perception of time and space are inextricably bound, as both time and space are experienced sequentially and concurrently. In fact, time can be seen as the sequential ordering of space as one moves through the landscape." (Motloch, 1991: 117)

The literature search also tries to benefit from Western and African sources from other parts of the continent where similar approaches have been attempted, that is a study of contexts with similar characteristics that have a bearing on the current study. This material has been sourced from the African Institute, Pretoria; the Academic Information Centre, University of Pretoria; UNISA Library, Pretoria. Its interpretation involves an analytical literature review.

Social, political, cultural and religious descriptions of the context were found in a variety of sources. In addition to the above, the material was mostly from private collections; National Records Office, Khartoum; WITS library, Johannesburg; Centre for Middle Eastern studies, Bergen. Anthropological, religious, social and historical studies were sourced. Interpretation relied on analysing and assessing the validity and relevance of the information.

Though the focus of some sections of the dissertation was on physical artefacts, including buildings, few of the sources are architectural, simply because of their non-existence/unavailability. Material was sourced again from private collections including that of Professor Sean O'Fahey, Bergen and travel documents and others from the Centre for Middle Eastern studies, University of Bergen. Interpretations were achieved through an analytical literature review.

In order to be able to address the peculiarities of the case study, it is attempted to place more focus on Sudanese sources in the final sections of the study, while the first part of the study locates the problem of the dissertation within the broader framework of thinking in the field. An analytical literature review is carried out culminating in an interpretation relevant to the topic of the thesis.

Empirical reasoning guides the research. This is a substantiated personal interpretation accomplished through identifying patterns in observations. At the same time a phenomenological standpoint is taken where the act of observation is not separated from that which is observed and the subjectivity of data obtained through individual thought processes is acknowledged.

Writings in Arabic are translated into English and revised by an official translator. Transliteration follows a consistent system. Where quotes are used from other sources the transliteration of the original source is adhered to.

The artefacts selected cover a progression of scales, from the level of the village/urban centre, houses and the body and clothing forms. This was not decided on from the outset but rather developed as links emerged through the research between these different forms of expression. From these broad guidelines more linguistic terms became apparent, social practices and sayings that elaborated on the preliminary concepts. Thus, the study evolved out of the issues pertinent to the area rather than out of an abstract theoretical assignment that may be irrelevant to the region.

1.6   THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An eco-systemic approach is used as a basis for defining the structure of the interpretative framework and establishing the linkages between the main components of the framework stated in 1.1. It will be an exercise in interpretative research, which exists in the phenomenological realm of inquiry.

Scant information exists on the issue of architecture in the area under consideration. There is no adequate theory base on which to support such a study and thus the formulation of such a base is seen to be a contribution to this field of study. A classification system for the built artefacts of the region is established as well as the identification of main themes in the area under study. From this it is possible to identify what has been neglected and still needs to be researched. An analytical, non-interactive document research method, whereby there was no direct contact with people or authors of the documents, was used due to logistical limitations.

The interrelated nature of artefact, context and interpreter is acknowledged. In the framework, Intuitive Gestalt Perception is used as a method rather than the phenomenological method of interpretation per se (This does not exclude future such interpretation within the framework). An 'ecology' is constructed of the context where artefacts emerged and developed, thus achieving a certain complexity in the description of an architectural environment that consists of linked sub-systems or layers identified through an inter-disciplinary investigation.

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The study pertains to postmodernist approaches in the use of language, blurring of the boundaries between disciplines, the focus on processes and in including popular culture.

The research approach is in line with the eco-systemic school of thought of the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria. The study has been conceived within this particular approach to environmental investigation which furthers the meta-level of understanding emphasising the heuristic, phenomenological and contextual teaching of architecture, through overt articulation (Fisher, 1992 and 1993).

The boundaries between the disciplines dissolve as it is discovered that to understand the built environment, one needs to build up an understanding of the culture, religion and social set up of a community as well as the geography and history of the region in question. In traditional contexts the separation of art from daily life, or a building from social interaction patterns is not possible. An interdisciplinary interpretation is attempted to address the issue of how people interact with the environment and how they shape their spaces at the micro and macro levels. An eco-systemic 'construct', a 'reading' of the context is articulated to identify the milieu within which the 'artefact' exists and how it developed/develops within that framework of peoples' beliefs and social interaction systems.

There are a number of limitations that need to be taken into consideration, one of these being the lack of previous research in the area from an interpretative, architectural point of view.

1.7   THE SPECIFIC BASIS OF EACH SUB-PROBLEM

Sub-problem 1: Despite the large amount of literature on vernacular architecture, there is no relevant interpretative framework with which to study the selected region, with its particular characteristics. Definitions of architecture exclude vernacular contexts. A philosophical approach thus needs to be identified, and a theoretical base articulated, so that architecture can be viewed eco-systemically within prevalent paradigms of thought and practice.

Hypothesis 1: In a study of the architecture of the northern riverain Sudan, where little architectural interpretation has been attempted and where institutional architecture is almost non-existent, there is relevance in approaching an architectural

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inquiry from an eco-systemic, inter-disciplinary viewpoint. Architectural theory, which resonates with the realities of a context, may be the basis for a framework for architectural study relevant to the selected region.

Sub-problem 2: The study context needs to be identified eco-systemically. This needs to be initiated by the articulation of social, political, cultural and religious descriptions and the identification of the recurring themes in the literature of the region.

Hypothesis 2: It is believed that through the eco-systemically based identification of recurring themes in the literature of/on the region, essential and incidental attributes of the place and culture can be articulated. This can become a tool in interpretation of tangible/ intangible artefacts, spatial interventions, and social practice.

Sub-problem 3: Relevant tangible artefacts need to be identified with a focus on the built environment. This analysis progresses from the level of the body/clothing and is extended to the scale of shelter/house and finally the village/urban centre.

Hypothesis 3: Careful and purposeful selection and analysis of a group of tangible artefacts that refer to the recurring themes can articulate the characteristics of the delineated context on the scale of the body, the shelter and the village, and be used in revealing the meaning inherent in the built culture.

Sub-problem 4: Relevant intangible artefacts of the culture of the northern riverain Sudan, need to be identified and analysed to enable further reflection on the meanings behind certain physical and spatial manifestations of that same culture.

Hypothesis 4: Careful and purposeful selection and analysis of relevant intangible artefacts can articulate the hidden characteristics of the built culture of the northern riverain Sudan region and elaborate on the themes that guide this study.

Sub-problem 5: Relevant tangible and intangible artefacts of the culture of the northern riverain Sudan need to be placed into an eco-systemic framework for use in architectural interpretation, research and education. This framework must enable articulation of structural relationships between intangible and tangible aspects of built culture and place making in the northern riverain Sudan.

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Hypothesis 5: An understanding of the built culture of the northern riverain Sudan requires the identification of significant relationships between tangible and intangible aspects of the region. Inclusion of the studied relationships into an eco-systemic framework will expose the role of intangible culture in space appropriation patterns and its implication on the character of place making in northern riverain Sudan, where a rich culture is expressed through architecture.

1.8   IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Sudan is seen to be a melting pot of many cultures existing at the fringes of both the Arab world and Africa. It has been a relatively neglected area of research, in part due to the overwhelming culture of Egypt, but also due to the unfortunate legacies of long periods of foreign rule, inherited poverty and socio-political instability.

This study could narrow a gap in the history of settlements in Africa. It can be a starting point, not to document, but rather to use existing documentation to interpret the culture of the area and how it has made its mark on the spatial and physical characteristics at various scales from the town/village to the individual house. It could also encourage the further documentation of a region that is rapidly changing as the importance of the little understood architecture is exposed.

This study is meant to provide a much-needed framework for research and a basis for architectural education in the country. Due to Euro-centric approaches to education and a history of colonialism, many architectural academics in the Sudan take little pride in local culture and how it has reflected on the built environment. Architectural production in the country is characterised by imitation and a rootless character. The global regionalist trend is yet to influence Sudanese architectural culture, even though there are some attempts at emulation, these are usually misguided or politically motivated. Sudanese professionals are sometimes isolated from mainstream society and have little appreciation for what can be learnt from it. A history of recurring political dominance, due to successive military coups, is also a factor that has inhibited professional and academic explorations as universities are targeted to propagate political ideologies and curricula and approaches strictly monitored. The Sudanese are forever tied up in heated political debates leaving little

time or effort for intellectual discourse. Perhaps discourses such as this one can help break the cycle of fruitless animosity.

For over a decade, the Sudan has been isolated from the international community. Those who leave rarely return. The seclusion of universities means that many approaches are outdated and irrelevant. Individual studies are scattered and undocumented and the academic scene is dominated by obsolete approaches and general neglect as people are caught up in an everlasting struggle for daily survival. This study needs to be seen in the light of these realities. For example, the researcher opted to go to Bergen rather than Khartoum to gather information. The Sudan appears to be continuously in a state of curfew. Anyone with a camera on the streets is under surveillance and targeted by security forces. This situation is slowly changing as the country comes under international pressure and as more oil reserves are discovered. Yet, the disruption that has happened at academic institutes will take long to remedy.

The study sets out to challenge isolated approaches in Sudan in searching for links between traditional identities and contemporary developments. Much of what is happening is seen to be an inaccurate representation of the past, and a naive interpretation of a complex reality. The re-writing or re-interpretation of history has been a much-contested issue in the cultural scene of the past few years. The role of architects in challenging this trend has been minimal, probably because the profession has never really reached a stage of maturity as far as contextual approaches to design are considered. These debates have had at least one positive outcome: current research efforts are more focused on local contexts. Yet, authorities still perceive the built environment to play a major role in conveying ideas about political ideologies, and innovative architects, planners and artists are delegated a secondary role in the process of new buildings and developments.

Interest in the thesis topic was motivated by a visit to the archaeological sites in Meroe in 1996 when the author questioned the amazing disparity between the remains of the old Nubian kingdoms and the material culture of the region today. Again a question that initiated the investigation was the predominance of the *shaykh's qubba* (conical domed tomb under which a religious leader is buried) in the region's landscape. It presides over villages, towns and even over a large city like

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Omdurman, yet, very little exists in terms of interpretative architectural research on its significance.

The dynamic interplay of a variety of factors that determine changing approaches to space and place is expressed and used to illustrate the differences between two different eras in the region's history. The interchange between the artefact, context and researcher's approach is recognized as affecting the outcome of this research endeavour.

The research is important as a framework for further inquiry, a framework for the teaching of architectural history and theory in the Sudan and as an experiment in testing the eco-systemic approach of the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria.

1.9   THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE RESEARCHER

The candidate is a BSc-1988 and MSc-1995 (Architecture) graduate, University of Khartoum, Sudan. The candidate also obtained a Post-Graduate Diploma from the Institute of Housing Studies in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 1992. Since completing the first degree the candidate has been involved in teaching at Khartoum University till 1996. In 1998 the candidate took up the post of lecturer at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, where she is still working. Teaching responsibilities comprise the teaching of theory (design methods – the topic of the candidate's masters thesis), housing theory and design.

Previous and on-going research has been on design theory, design methods (procedural design theory), teaching approaches relevant for architecture and housing, including current practice, delivery and resultant landscapes.

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