

CHAPTER 1

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# Building a Home for Circumpolar Architecture

## *An Introduction*

Robert P. Wishart

The hearth is at the centre. It is a simple statement with profound implications. As Stephen Pyne (1995: 3) reminds us, humans are ‘uniquely fire creatures on a uniquely fire planet’. And yet the hearth, the place where we ignite and tend to so many of our fires, is not simply a container for, or a site of, this particularity. Take, for example, the hearth as philosophized and mythologized by the ancient Greeks. Hestia, the goddess of the hearth, was also the goddess of the home, architecture and the symbolic and ritual centre of the inhabitants, the ‘oikos’ or household (Vernant 1969: 132).

To the ancient Greeks, the hearth, the home and the household were inseparable, and as Carsten (1995b) illustrates, this understanding is not unique to the classical world. The relatedness of the hearth, the home and the household correspond to the complex and creative relatedness inherent in kinship.<sup>1</sup> But would it be reductive to understand the house as container for and site of the household, and would it ignore the coextension of the hearth, house and household with the environment and the cosmos? Furthermore, would these reductions also serve to eclipse real lives with representations that might serve other interests? For the collective effort of the authors gathered here, these questions became fundamental to the inquiry about the ways in which the hearth in the circumpolar North is at the centre of something much larger.

There are few other places that one could imagine the crucial interdependencies and relationships between the hearth, home and household would be as apparent as that in the circumpolar North. Indeed, they are essential for human inhabitation in this region. This collection makes a unique contribution, not only in recognizing the necessity of this climatic adaptation within the circumpolar North, but goes much further in

demonstrating how the North is in itself uniquely situated to illuminate how finding solutions for meeting these necessities is part of engaging in finding solutions to equally important aspects of being human and of living complex political lives.

This connection is not without its challengers. In the colonial imagination, the latter set of solutions did not follow from the former – indeed, it was quite the opposite. Northern people's lives were imagined to be simple, fragmentary and ephemeral, and so were their homes. So rectifying this image is a further contribution made by the authors collected here.

Building a home, making a fire in the hearth, being part of a household – in the circumpolar North these are all enmeshed with other activities and events of life. Indeed, the entanglements are of such a high degree that the activities and events often obscure what is at the centre, and we forget the profound role that these have in the unfolding of people's lives in the North.

It is not that they were each ignored – as the chapters in this book attest, the form of homes, the physical and symbolic affordances of the hearth and of fire, and the social structure of households have each had their moments of being in multiple academic foci and in the gaze of the circumpolar states. A common frustration expressed by almost all the authors is how these various attentions can also often present themselves in 'unhealthy' ways. Whether it is in a portrayal of the primitive north, an obsession with reform and domestication, or a state-sponsored snapshot of its northern peoples, of where and with whom they live, there has been an ossification of the home as form, of transforming the hearth into its base utilitarian necessity, and fixing the household in time as a human resource or a social problem.

Each of the papers in this collection deals in some way with the problem of eclipse, and each is also trying to bring to light the problems of ossification so that we might understand the relationships between homes, the hearth and the household as sites of 'becoming' (Carsten 1995b: 223) that have very deep foundations.

As part of this collection's purpose is to document the intellectual history of circumpolar hearths and how it is embedded in state projects, it behooves us to recognize our own position and how the particularities of this collection unfolded. This unique collection of papers represents the multidisciplinary thoughts of an international body of authors who have been working together to tie the significance of dwellings in the circumpolar North to relational metaphors arising out of our various investigations into history, cosmology, demography, colonialism, economy and architecture.

Bringing the authors in this collection into conversation has been the work of David G. Anderson, who recognized the common problems

and lacunae in anthropology, archaeology, museum studies and historical demography in the study of homes, hearths and households in the circumpolar North, and sought to bring together scholars who were interested in these subjects. These conversations began in the early 2000s, but did not find a real centre until 2005 when the European Science Foundation put out a call for humanities research networks focusing on the circumpolar North. Aptly named BOREAS, the central theme and organizing title for the research agenda was ‘Histories from the North – environments, movements, narratives’. An insistence on histories from the North, rather than histories of the North, has the effect of shifting the focus and allows for a return to the centre of social practice: the home, the hearth and the household.

In recognizing this potential for reinvigorating the study of circumpolar architecture, religious practice, social organization and indigenous political expression, the fire was lit and the result was a project on the dwellings of the circumpolar North. One of the stipulations of the proposal process was that each project should have a recognizable anagram, and HHH (Home, Hearth and Household) best reflected the fact that we are working with three general metaphors that serve as relational anchors in northern people’s lives.

While BOREAS provided us places to gather and with funds to network, the building blocks of research were made possible by various grants that were awarded in the researcher’s home country (please see the acknowledgements for details on funding). This book is just one of the outcomes of the research and the ongoing conversations of the people who were directly involved in the HHH theme, but like any conversation others – Nakhshina, Looovers, and Vaté – entered the discourse and became crucial to its diversity at other points along the way. Also included in this book, but not an official member of the HHH team, is Ingold, but he has been part of the conversation from the very beginning as one of the designers and builders of BOREAS. What makes this book different from the other publications that have developed out of these individual projects is that this is the only place where the research trajectories come together. It is, in effect, a home and an intellectual household.

As a key symbol of northern indigenous lifeways, the conical lodge served to structure the first level of inquiry. Here is an architectural form that is known throughout the circumpolar North, but what can we really say about all the relationships that go into its design, the sourcing of its materials and its construction? From this seemingly straightforward question came the complex of problems reported in this book, and none would argue that this is exhaustive.

What can the conical lodge tell us about the way people live? What about the centrality of the fire – is this not what really transcends geography

and time? After all, it is the remains of the hearth that forms so much of the important archaeological evidence of northern lives. What about other vernacular architectural forms practised today and throughout history? What do we know about the make-up of the household, and how do we know these things? As the site of reference for this conversation, the conical lodge became a meeting place for the entangled trails of inquiry that sometimes seem to be leading off into the distance but always, somehow, come back again.

Vernacular architecture is made without a strict preformed plan but it is not chaotic. A classic argument about whether there is something fundamentally different between an architect and a 'folk builder' rests on the relationship between ideas and spatial form, and whether or not the individual working without a blueprint is creative or is merely reproducing a form (Hubka 1979). As others have argued more recently, this debate positions the relationship as that between two distinct, separate entities – the mind and the physical world – and leaves out the essential element of materiality (e.g. Godelier 1986, Tilley 2004), or materials and their 'affordances' (Ingold 2007b: 3).

Until quite recently this is how most building was accomplished. It was the combination of building with designs and materials that flowed and mingled during the creation of any particular structure. If it is the case that vernacular architecture exists in this flow between designing and building, and is always going through a process of alteration as it is reflected in the imagination of the builder in relation to place and variable materials then why, at a superficial glance, is there such consistency in final form?

It is not possible for this book to answer fully this question of consistency, although it does go to some length to explain it. What it does do to great effect is demonstrate that the quick glance really does miss a great deal. Certainly, much can be said about the conical lodge as a solution to the complicated problem of meeting the demands for a lightweight, mobile form of architecture that will not only provide shelter but will be reasonably thermally efficient. More can be said of the materials that make up its construction and how they need to be replaceable. Learning how to do all of this 'properly', and passing this knowledge on, is equally complicated, as is the experiential significance of the final form. Finally, more can be said when the demands change and new solutions are found.

If this book is a home for this academic household, and if the conical lodge with its corresponding hearth is to some degree at its heart, then how should it be built? Like many homes in the vernacular style, it went through many changes and partial rebuilds before a good compromise could be reached between the parts and the final form.

At first it seemed best to use the preexisting framework of the HHH project. The book could be organized into three sections on home,

hearth and household. While this provided a good triangular frame, the chapters did not wrap neatly around it. Many of the chapters covered all three themes but some jutted out and left gaps where they should join together with their neighbours. The next solution was to organize the chapters around the disciplines at their centres. This solution made for a better cover, but there was something missing in the structure to hold it all up. What was needed was an organization that combined these two approaches, so in this book the chapters flow around the circumpolar North geographically, like following the wall of a canonical lodge, but with a vertical structure provided by organizing papers within each geographical section into a narrative that acknowledges discipline and theme.

In the building of a dwelling a key question must be asked: where is the entrance? In many traditions, and there are good examples to be found within the chapters of this book, the entrance is regimented. Sometimes the entrance is located for practical reasons – in the circumpolar North, it makes sense to use climatic knowledge to locate the entrance away from the potentially harsh forces of weather. Equally important is the orientation of an entrance to coincide with cosmological and spiritual understandings, and these can be as regimented as the climatic considerations. Then there are the forces of social organization and larger infrastructural considerations: entrances to homes are often placed in accordance to the relationship between the household and the larger community.

Two chapters in this book ask fundamental philosophical questions about northern forms of architecture and could serve as a passageway into the geographical discussions, those of Anderson and Ingold. As an entrance is also an exit, these two chapters serve to bring us in and out of the conversation.

Returning to the theme of the conical lodge, it is apt that this book begins with the thoughts of Ingold on the place of the lodge in larger circumpolar themes of relationality. Ingold argues that the lodge, as a home for circumpolar people, is also a nexus in a multidimensional world of relations. Building from an understanding of the home as the centre in the rhizome-like interactions and experiences of animals, people, plants and the land that have become so important in our understanding of northern life, Ingold asks us to consider what happens when we situate ourselves beside the fire at the centre of the lodge and follow the smoke. By looking up through the interlocking poles of a conical lodge and out through the smoke hole we get a new sense of the relationships between those who inhabit it and the cosmos. He argues that the place of the lodge is one that is located in a world made up of relations between the land and the people, but that we need to also stop neglecting other possibilities such as that of relationships within an ‘earth–sky’ world.

The book then moves on to discuss the building of a conical lodge in a new context. Ingold starts his philosophical treatise on the conical lodge with an example of his experience with a lodge that was set up on the grounds of the Tromsø Museum. This particular lodge was provided by a combined effort of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre and the Tłı̨chǫ Nation, Northwest Territories, Canada.

As curator of the lodge, Andrews describes how this particular dwelling was constructed and the context which led to its creation. As a part of a repatriation and revitalization project, the construction of two Tłı̨chǫ lodges (one of which was brought for a short time to Tromsø) brought together museum staff and the Tłı̨chǫ Nation, and the chapter describes how differing agendas between the parties were overcome and coalesced into new understandings of how museums can learn to dwell and, in so doing, relate in more egalitarian ways to the communities who are the source of the materials in their exhibitions.

The revitalization of the conical lodge with the Tłı̨chǫ brought together a community, and the teaching of skills in working with skin and building with wood became important outcomes of the construction of the dwelling. The skill in building another form of home is taken up by Wishart and Loovers, whose chapter shifts the geographical focus north, to the homes of the Teet'it Gwich'in. In this chapter, log cabins are examined as important elements in Gwich'in human-land relationships, and in their articulations about tradition and political jurisdiction. In the wider scope of this book, this chapter introduces the fact that while the conical lodge might be undergoing something of a revitalization, there are other architectural forms that arose in more recent history that have become as central to practice and life on the land. This theme is explored in other ways as the book moves eastward to examine the homes of the Sámi.

In common with Wishart and Loovers, Bjørklund asks why certain architectural forms come to be paradigmatically linked to indigenous identity. In Norway the conical lodge, referred to in Northern Sámi as *lávvu*, has come to be a key symbol in Sámi ethno-politics and it is duplicated in published materials, website banners, and incorporated into the planned architecture of government buildings and private businesses. Bjørklund argues that the emphasis on this one form eclipses the diversity of historical Sámi architecture, and he provides evidence that it had its fluorescence during a period of reindeer-herding intensification for the Sámi, and then only as a form that was used during the movement of reindeer. However, as a symbol which instantly links the Sámi to international indigenous rights discourses, the conical lodge is of greater value now than when solely considered as a home.

Picking up this conversation on Sámi vernacular architecture and the revitalization of form is the chapter by Beach. Like Bjørklund, Beach

writes about the historical use of different architectural forms, but he focuses on one particular site and documents his own observations over the last 35 years. This detailed account of one site allows for a discussion of the revitalization and devitalization of forms, and includes insight into how the adoption of certain technologies, such as a metal stove, can change other practicalities of house life.

In the oscillation between revitalization and devitalization, Beach anticipates that should there be a revitalization in certain Sámi architectural forms – such as a prefabricated conical lodge – it is entirely possible that there would be a corresponding devitalization of Sámi practices that have developed in relation to the changing Sámi architectural world. Above all, Beach argues that practicality is of central concern for Sámis with whom he works, and that the alterations in the last 35 years in structural design and building technique are most often in response to practical concerns rather than an outward projection of tradition.

The discussion on housing forms arising out of the chapters thus far asks under what conditions northern people will seriously alter their architectural preferences. Beach and Bjørklund remind us that these changes can be attributed to a range of factors, but what is clear is that northern people have many options available to them, and that the result can be contrary to what one would anticipate. Part of the problem in figuring out what is going on with the forms of homes is, as Beach reminds us, that we tend to neglect the changes that have occurred in the household. To remedy this problem, we now redirect the conversation back onto the people who are living in these homes and how their social structure has also gone through interesting changes. Staying in Scandinavia, the next two chapters present a view of changing household structure that can be built from an application of historical demography.

Brännlund and Axelsson present an interesting problem in Swedish Sámi demography. According to the historical data accumulated by Swedish authorities there is very little difference in the composition of Sámi and non-Sámi Swedish households. As Brännlund and Axelsson argue, this finding presents an anthropological problem. It is known from the Sámi literature that household structure was not similar to that of the wider Swedish community, and there are a few possibilities for explaining this disconnect between bodies of evidence. The authors conclude that the data were accumulated using categories that make it appear as if the Sámi are the same as the wider Swedish community. They present an alternative way of organizing the data that works with indigenous categories for the household, and then demonstrate how this changes the view completely.

Brännlund and Axelsson argue that one of the key factors in how the household has been misrepresented is in how heads of households are

determined in the statistical account. Sommerseth is also interested in accounting for heads of households, but in the case of the Norwegian Sámi. The literature on household change in the North tends to argue that there has been a tendency towards the creation of nuclear families at the expense of traditional family structures. Sommerseth argues that this may be true, but not in the way that is predicted, and that in fact multiple strategies were used by the Sámi to maintain the elderly as the household heads while allowing the younger men to pursue dangerous, but lucrative, economic activities. What then appears as a move towards one household type is actually a change that increased variability and flexibility, corresponding to Beach's argument about the implications of revitalization and practicality.

The image of the Sámi house and household provided by the previous four chapters is one that flows in relation to internal and external forces. These chapters discuss Sámi history over the last few centuries, but how does this relate to the archaeological evidence of the more distantly related residents of these lands? The chapter by Halinen, Hedman and Olsen reports on the archaeology of Sámi hearth row sites from the late iron and early medieval periods in northern Norway and Finland.

The archaeology of hearth rows returns us to the centre, to a discussion of the heart of the dwelling. A stereotype of the past in the North is that of primitive simplicity, and caught up in this baggage is the idea that the hearths of the past were always round, as right angles are a thing of advanced cultures and more modern times. As Halinen et al. describe, the discovery of rectangular hearths that are arranged in a linear fashion, also dating from the Iron Age, seriously challenges this stereotype of static primitive simplicity. What is revealed in the work by these authors is that the picture of the more distant Sámi past is as complex and shifting as that of more recent times. However, what is also revealed in this chapter is a remarkable degree of consistency with the ethnographic literature on Sámis in regards to the positioning of artefacts in relation to the hearth. It is this contradiction between the conservation of some elements and flux in others that presents an analytical challenge.

Vaté continues the discussion on the hearth and brings us to the final geographical set of chapters on Russia and Siberia, with her analysis of a Chukchi reindeer herding ritual. Vaté's chapter gives us a clear ethnographic illustration of how the hearth serves as a central focal point in both the ritual and practical lives of people in the North. Her insistence that the hearth connects people's relationships to the cosmos and the material world simultaneously brings into question how the hearth works to bridge people's histories (as expressed in ritual practice) and their present-day activities.

Following from Vaté, Nakhshina approaches the elements of time and the symbolic capacity of the built environment in the small Russian village

of Kuzomen'. Like many other places where the indexical qualities of the past are engaged with differently between the permanent residents and seasonal inhabitants, the houses and ruins of Kuzomen' provide Nakhshina with a collage of materials and symbolic representations to document how incomers are often far more interested in the past, while the permanent residents are mindful of the past but are far more interested in the present and future affordances of their homes and the village. This chapter allows us to engage with a similar situation as described by others in this book, that while it can be difficult to live an idealized past, materials and homes can tell stories and memorialize while the inhabitants go on with the business of everyday life.

Nakhshina introduces the idea that homes can become like museums and that sometimes people living in them treat them this way. This idea begins to bring the book back around to the question of how a particular home may find commonalities with others. Oetelaar, Anderson and Dawson take this conversation forward and present a chapter that compares how the Inuit and Evenki, two groups of people separated by huge distances, geological barriers, language and culture, nevertheless build homes that are similar in various important ways. The key to these similarities is how both build their homes and organize the internal space in relation to a set of cosmological beliefs that architecturally serve as a mnemonic, or perhaps a holographic relationship between the parts of the home and the whole – the landscape.

Oetelaar et al. conclude their chapter by arguing that material and economic similarities are certainly relevant in the discussion of why house forms are similar, but it might also be true that both Evenkis and Inuit are in conversation with the land and hear 'whispers' of how things should be. Ziker continues the conversation on the symbolic relationship between the home and the environment with his discussion of how virtuous practices are communicated and serve to reinforce beliefs in the cosmological and physical worlds of the indigenous people of northern Siberia. The structure of the household, the building and organization of the house, and the insistence on referring to the hearth in kin terms, are all reasonable social norms in the interconnected web of relations that is dwelling in Siberia.

Ziker's chapter brings the book back to the beginning, not only in a geographical sense but also in the way that it asks questions about the norms of practice and how these are related to experience and cosmological belief. The book began with Ingold asking how the dwelling is situated in an earth-sky world, but as a way of exiting this collection it is only fitting that the architect of the HHH project should have the final word. Anderson thus provides the final chapter, where he brings it all together with his ability to situate the house that has been built of these chapters into the wider academic world of international scholarship.

One of the key ideas that emerged in many of our discussions about homes, hearths and households is the way that in the North homes never seem to be complete. The Gwich'in elders I worked with were continually adding to their cabins and sometimes they would take parts of them apart to use the bits elsewhere. So, in this tradition we have built a home in this book but the parts are available to the reader to make all sorts of new things as well.

## Notes

1. This idea is further elaborated upon in the edited collection *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond* (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995a) from which this collection's title takes its inspiration.