

[slide 1] – intro comments

## **'Interdisciplinary approaches to sustainable housing: dwelling in the future'**

[slide 2] – content of talk

### **1. An interdisciplinary approach**

We all know that the big issue facing housing designers today is that of sustainability, both environmental and social: how do we design and build new housing stock which will have a long life-span both in terms of its energy efficiency and its capacity to meet evolving social needs in modern-day mixed societies?

We believe that it is important to take an interdisciplinary approach to analysing and understanding this question.

As a social anthropologist of architecture and the built environment I have been working over a number of years to explore the 'lived experience' of buildings, using ethnographic research methods to observe and document people's occupation of space and response to buildings, and anthropological concepts to interpret and understand these responses.

More recently, I have also been applying these methods to try and understand how architects themselves actually design - by studying their working practices and how they use their design tools as part of an over-arching process of thinking through and communicating architectural ideas with their clients, planners, and public audiences – and ultimately delivering those ideas as built form.

So today I am going to say a few words about the relevance of ethnographic and anthropological approaches to housing design, with a focus on the concept of 'creolisation' as one which may hold some value for architects in understanding the housing needs of complex modern-day European societies.

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### **2. Diversity and localism**

I've just read a short review of a new ethnographic study called *Being Danish: paradoxes of identity in everyday life*, which is published in the most recent issue of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society* in the UK. I haven't had a chance to read the book myself, but it seems to be an interesting exploration of perceptions of Danish identity as they are manifested through everyday social interactions. The author, Richard Jenkins, points out that the Danish Nationalist Party has received between 12 and 14 % of the vote in elections since 2001, implying that notions

of what it means to be 'Danish', in terms of ethnicity and culture, have become pervasive in the public sphere. Jenkins suggests that the 'visible difference of others' is perceived by many Danes as 'a provocation to their much-beloved egalitarian society' – implying that visible difference and diversity has become more evident in Danish society than it once was.

In the UK similar issues are raised by the Conservative Party's Localism bill, first introduced in 2010, which aims to put responsibility for planning initiatives in the hands of local communities, freed from centralised government influence and control. But 'Localism' raises many questions about the constitution of modern-day local communities in Britain, in both urban and rural locations, and about hierarchies of power and influence at local level.

In an ethnically diverse metropolitan society such as the UK's, it can't be assumed that local communities will be integrated or even inclusive - and planning decisions that are made by small elite groups on behalf of the wider community will not necessarily be representative of everybody's needs, aspirations and identities. How then will issues of difference be negotiated in these scenarios? And how will they be manifested through localised planning initiatives that directly influence the shape of the new built environment, particularly housing?

I'm not going to say more about this now, but Pierre will come back to this topic in his presentation of some UK housing case studies, which illustrate an architect's direct experience of working within this context.

Rather, I want to take the opportunity to speak a little more broadly about how architects might think about the conditions for designing housing for diverse societies, through an anthropological lens trained on the concept of creolisation. How might we think about what ideas of 'home' and 'belonging' mean to people inhabiting what might and has been described as a 'creolised' world? And how might this influence how architects go about designing housing?

### **3. Home and belonging in a creolised world**

Practices of 'home' and home life are central to the construction of social and cultural identity - and as we know, every culture has manifested itself in typical housing forms. Those built forms become not only the settings and catalysts for the reproduction of social identities and communities, but dynamic social entities in themselves. The anthropologists Carsten and Hugh-Jones, in their book *About the House*, emphasise that houses provide basic cognitive models to think, structure and experience the world, as embodied experience, and loci for dense webs of signification and affect.

But post-colonial Europe has become a melting-pot of cultures and identities, and traditional approaches to housing form may no longer always be appropriate. The Modernist movements in architecture recognised a century ago that the concept and design of the home was

fundamental to radical utopian *and* heterotopian reconceptualisations of social order, social organisation, and social life in the post-war and post-colonial period – influenced both by movements of mass migration and technological innovation. Today those modernist experiments are often overlooked or rejected - but it is worth re-visiting them when considering how architects today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, should respond to what might be called a ‘creolisation’ of European (and other) societies in their explorations of new dwelling forms for the future.

Let’s start by consider whether this term, ‘creolisation’, is appropriate to describe modern-day conditions - and then, how ethnographic research methods might provide insights into contemporary practices of home life and social identity that could be valuable to architects in achieving the goal of social sustainability in housing design.

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#### **4. Creolisation as a concept and manifestation in built form**

The term creolisation was coined in 1971 by Kamau Brathwaite to describe a process of cultural change, through acculturation plus interculturalisation, that effectively distinguished Creole societies in the New World, or Atlantic world. In 1976, Mintz and Price defined Creole cultures as new creations adapting to social and geographical environments, which represented a break, not continuity with, African traditions and heritage – challenging the Afrocentrism of existing scholarship. There was an emphasis on the link between creole identity and political resistance, and in the French Caribbean, novelists such as Patrick Chamoiseau explicitly linked the concept of ‘creolite’ with creative, localised forms and practices of spatial inhabitation and construction in resistance to French state-led urban and housing initiatives. Subsequently, anthropologists Richard Price and Huon Wardle have suggested that creole culture is characterised by a flexibility of thought - a creative complexity, ambiguity and disorder - which constitute an innate ability to imagine and express alternative (utopian or dystopian) realities - ‘other’ narratives of identity and belonging, incorporating explicit notions of adventure and freedom - which predisposed it to be always in the vanguard of modernity.

So what is the relevance of creolisation, or creole culture, in the Caribbean, and its possible manifestations in built form, to present-day European society and housing design?

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Well, in the first place, Paul Gilroy in 1993 argued that Western concepts of modernity and modernism were based on a discourse of European enlightenment, cultural and racial purity, which were essentially misplaced. He made the case for the Caribbean to be recognized as a crucible of modernism, produced through two-way contact between Europe and the New World. He said that the experience of non-white, non-European ‘others’ had been written out of the narrative of modernism, but in fact historical realities showed that processes of cultural inter-

mixing and mutation were fundamental to its formation. In other words, modernism and modernity was not a one-way export from Europe to the rest of the world.

In 1996, the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz explicitly used the term 'creolisation' to describe the social reality of Stockholm in the era of globalisation. In his earlier paper, 'The world in creolisation' (1987), he argued that mass migration, and the co-existence of diverse ethnically-defined communities in metropolitan centres, had led to a realignment of the relationship between 'centre' and 'periphery' through the careful maintenance of long-distance relationships and cultural attachments, enabled by technological developments. He celebrated this so-called 'creolisation' of cultures in European cities, and its spatial manifestations in local neighbourhoods, resulting from the different ways in which diverse cultures represent themselves, their identities, and their connections around the world, in the physical environment.

Hannerz's description of modern-day Stockholm evokes an image of modernity which, as Gilroy maintains, is far from pure, cohesive, or even orderly, but highly varied, often improvised, and opportunistic. To paraphrase Bruno Latour, it is 'messy', and often not grandiose. But, as Karen Fog Olwig (1997) has argued in her anthropological work on culture and transnational flows, space is usually contested, and the ways in which social relationships and daily practices are played out at local level demonstrate the mobility and fluidity of modern-day life.

The problem for architects with this scenario, I would suggest, is that they are generally employed with the expectation that they will produce - some would say impose - order and coherence on the raw material they are given. Perhaps then the challenge, in a modern 'creolised' and metropolitan world, is how to create a framework for order which also creates space for diversity, variety, inter-mixing, and improvisation to flourish within an overall schema of cultural co-existence and communication.

I want to cite the work of Wendy Knepper at this point - a UK academic in the field of postcolonial literature, who has written on notions of creolised identity and its physical manifestations in the Caribbean context (2000) - specifically in relation to the concept of cultural 'bricolage' as coined by Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966). Levi-Strauss defined this as 'an adaptive mode of being in the world' - and the 'bricoleur' as someone who proceeds in an improvisatory fashion, making do with, salvaging, whatever is at hand, in response to new circumstances and needs - an attitude in tune with current environmental concerns. He contrasted the bricoleur with the 'engineer', who proceeds in an orderly, methodical, and scientific fashion, transforming realities on the ground by reference to abstract schema.

Knepper explores how the French Caribbean 'creolistes' evoked the notion of bricolage to describe the essence of creolisation, as an improvisatory process of mixing and layering, which allowed memories to be re-framed and re-assembled to create new forms of identity and communal enrichment, through physical forms. In Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*, for example, the construction of creole, shanty-town houses is literally contrasted with the transformations

conceived by the visiting urban planner from France, who envisages the relocation of Texaco's inhabitants to new concrete-built HLM housing. The process of bricolage out of which Texaco emerges embodies an adaptive re-use of resources with commitment and ingenuity, which Chamoiseau presents and re-evaluates as the essence of the 'creole' spirit - as a positive process of creative self-determination.

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Chamoiseau states that *'the Creole urban planner must ... restart new trails, in order to arouse a counter city in the city. And around the city, reinvent the countryside. That's why the architect must become a musician, sculptor, painter... and the urban planner a poet'* (p61). And I think this is a fitting note on which to conclude this section, and move on to say a few words about the research methods that can be used to generate insights into the social practices and cultural identities constituting localised creolised realities that architects may think about responding to.

### **5. Ethnographic research methods and creolisation 'in action' in Qatar**

I have used interviews, observation, photographic and video documentation in the course of my ethnographic research into people's relationship with the built environment, and how social identities are constructed, represented and experienced through the built form. These are classic anthropological research methods, and I make no claim for this approach as radical or innovative, nor do I have any great interest in using the latest technological tools. The key is to enter the field with an open mind and learn how to watch, listen, respond and document in detail, without preconceived ideas of an outcome. The data collected – fieldnotes, recordings, photographs, sketches - provides the basis for descriptive and interpretive written accounts, and not for a design approach as such – after all, I am not an architect, but a writer, and my medium is the written text.

However, I believe that this process of research, and the analysis and written work which comes out of it, is an important platform for architectural thinking and design. Similarly, I believe it is important to reintegrate descriptions of the built environment and its construction with the anthropological accounts of social life and organisation from which they were traditionally separated (see Rodman 1993) and make explicit the relationship between the two. I am interested in evoking and communicating the experience and affective characteristics of place and built form as a dynamic process of social reproduction. Fundamental to this is the ability to be able to spend an extended period of time visiting and revisiting a place and its inhabitants – a luxury which is rarely available to architects, and for which it is difficult to find the financial support, other than through academic research grants. This requires an acknowledgement on the part of academic institutions of the importance of interdisciplinary research, in order to fund and facilitate appropriate partnerships between researchers, writers and designers.

Pierre and I started this process in the exhibition Land Architecture People, for which I conducted preliminary interviews with the clients on a number of domestic projects which he had

already designed for them, in order to explore their perceptions and experience of the process of architectural design and the impact it might have on their lives. But more recently I have been working on a rather different project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, which is exploring the design by British architects of a new kind of cosmopolitan, or if you like 'creolised' urban environment in Qatar, using ethnographic research methods focused on production in the architects' and client's offices.

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The mixed-use, supposedly sustainable, Msheireb development in Doha is indicative of the emergence of new urban settings around the world which are led by the need to accommodate a mixed and complex social environment, generated by migration and mobility, and embracing many different cultural and ethnic identities. At the same time, Msheireb is to be stamped, or branded, with a clear overarching 'Qatari' and Islamic identity, as part of the process of establishing and branding Doha as a pre-eminent urban centre on a world stage. The question of social identity and how to define, represent and mediate this through a design conceived by British architects in collaboration with a Qatari client, led by an American director of development strongly influenced by previous development experience in Dubai, has been central to the inception of this ambitious project - and its outcome and impact on urban and architectural development in the region as a whole are the subject of much discussion.

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During the course of my interviews with the architects and client representatives working on this scheme, and my examination of the digital visualisations which have been produced in order to project and develop ideas of what this place and community might be like, it has become evident that the question of designing a suitable environment for such a multi-layered, mixed-up, transnational social entity has been challenging.

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One of the key questions has been how to re-frame Qatari social practices and memories in relation to their own global experiences of other places and social practices, and to those of the foreigners who have migrated to Qatar from many different parts of the geographical and social world, with whom they live in close proximity, as a minority in their own country. The question of how far social networks and settings, everyday interactions, are or should be shared by people of different origins or segregated is central to the design challenge, as is that of how local and global experience, connections, and identities are most appropriately represented in the physical environment.

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These are not easy questions for architects to respond to, especially without the benefit of fieldwork on the ground which might provide some tangible data to work with. I quote here from an interview with one of the architects working in London on this project, who explained to me that although they had done a considerable amount of research into the architectural history and

vernacular of Qatar, they still faced great difficulties in understanding the social complexities of the project, particularly in the area of its housing component:

'I used to ask question after question to Fatima ... questions like: what do they do in a majlis for us just to understand, I mean yes there needs to be awareness of proportional space and you need seating and we understand all of that, but to really understand what people do in a majlis or how often people use a majlis? Those are the kinds of questions because we just didn't know and when the women enter into their apartments will they take their veils off? Is it practical to have a cloakroom at the entrance? Very basic things... [But] the difficulty was for them also. They hadn't been to a 'Qatari apartment' so it's been a very challenging process for everyone. We re-layouted our apartments so many times just because of sizing, the sizes of the rooms, because the Qataris are used to having these big villas, and there would be massive rooms. But in an apartment is it practical? but if you don't provide it no-one would rent it; but then if you do provide it can anyone rent it because it would be too expensive?...' (interview with AM, 290212)

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The Msheireb project then is an interesting case study, beyond Europe, but typical of the way that globalised, postcolonial, urban centres are evolving to accommodate modern-day, transnational, multi-layered, 'creolised' communities. It reveals the challenges which architects face in understanding these conditions, and opens serious questions about the appropriate design response. However, when I asked my respondent quoted above whether they had documented the social research they had done, she replied, 'not really', implying that it had just fed straight into the design – largely due to lack of time and resources to record their findings as they proceeded with the work.

So I would conclude by emphasising again the need to produce more explicit documentation, through ethnographic research, of these scenarios – but also as an explicit basis for developing a body of architectural thinking which perhaps draws inspiration from the idea of the so-called creole spirit of 'bricolage' and adaptive re-use which I have referred to earlier, and how this might fuel the development of genuinely sustainable housing forms for dwelling in the future.