



Picture of a House - toward the ethnography of the academia

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There was a time when universities were modelled after churches. Today their designs echo temples of different kinds - namely corporate headquarters. In light of what is going on in the academia, this makes perfect sense. [The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies](#) of Geneva - where I will be a visiting fellow in 2016 at the [Program for the Study of International Governance](#) - is the most concrete embodiment of this new architecture that I have seen.



The Institute's Maison de la Paix is – justifiably – hailed as “[one of the remarkable architectural achievements of the 21st century in French-speaking Switzerland](#)“. Designed by [architect Eric Ott](#), the building is a striking interplay of open spaces, multi-cited passage ways and infinite-seeming staircases, all wrapped up in careful ornate detailing that echoes its ‘petal’-like construction.

The building is certain to produce awe in a first-time visitor.

However, whether it is something that inspires creative academic spirits is far more uncertain. At the time of its design, Institute staff cautioned that the building would be totally unsuited for academic work. Now experience has proven this to be true, at least to a degree.

Researchers complain of headaches due to the light that penetrates through the building unobstructed – it is entirely made of glass, with a bit of steel, concrete and grey carpets to match. Windows of lecture rooms cannot be opened in between sessions as everything is centrally run, also air-conditioning.

During the summer months you can literally become the prisoner of comfort – when the sun threatens to heat the building excessively, shutters automatically come down, sometimes for days. There you thus are, blocked off from the beautiful mountainous scenery and outside air, with nothing but centrally-governed comfort and anonymous expectations of excellence to keep you company.

Simultaneously, perhaps as a counter-reaction to the material coldness of the building, the atmosphere hosts distinct collegial warmth.

A sense of inspiration is tangible, as is the feeling of shared discovery. Or is this merely the wishful thinking of a newcomer? It's too soon to tell. But why would spirits not be enthusiastic? For anyone studying the UN or ‘international’ anything, one can hardly be more at the ‘centre’. Virtually everything one wishes



to study is concretely located within a stone's throw away.

Or closer still - as we know, there is no 'outside' to the academia any more, or in the reverse, to the corporate interests and neo-liberal managerial practices that increasingly inhabit our once detached academic corridors. In the study of human rights this has always been the case, at least partially: what we know today as the 'human rights phenomenon' has from the start been a particularly interesting mixture of engaged activism and detached(-appearing) analysis.

More often than not central architects of the phenomenon have also been its most influential scholarly analysts.

Today this condition accompanies ethnographic queries intensely: my informants are - literally - former colleagues at my research institutes, they are my former professors and students. They act as collaborators in influential research ventures, they act as peer reviewers for my publications and at times make decisions over my funding applications.



Over the past years this has become concretised in my journey as a scholar as I have immersed myself more in the world of the social media. Whereas for the anthropologists of previous generations their journeys into the field often meant arduous travelling to great physical distances, to me this journey can be completed via a bike ride. The journey of my observations to my audience - both within the academia and beyond, not that there is a difference between the two - is even shorter: often it consists merely of the 'send' button on a mobile app, be it via [my Twitter account](#), or more recently, [my Instagram](#).



This realisation feels quite scary: I have no way of hiding my perceptions from my informants.

Consequently, if and since I want to stay true to the mission of documenting my journey, it will be very challenging to attempt to keep the results of my analysis until the end. In the worst case scenario this may mean that if my informants won't like what I conclude, my access can be blocked off instantly. Yet there are



also tremendous possibilities thereof: such transparency offers genuine possibilities for societal impact – the kind that we collectively talk of continually, but never really seem able to realise.

With all these observations combined, the translucent appearance of the building acquires new connotations: it becomes cast as a delicious laboratory for studying the academia, and our contemporary condition more generally.

There is a compelling sense of being present in the ‘now’, perhaps also the future. Maybe this is why I find it an almost curiously calming place for focussed analysis and writing. And what can I say: I actually really like the building’s aesthetic!

I think that I will like it here.

“Whenever you enter a new field site, draw a house”.

Jukka Siikala, Professor Emeritus of Social Anthropology