

Decoding Homes and Houses

Julienne Hanson

with contributions by Bill Hillier, Hillaire Graham and David Rosenberg



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*The mystery of houses is the mystery
of our mind. We move from room to
room and only inhabit the present.
Abandoned rooms are like abandoned
thoughts. We can remember them and
so we can return to them. As the shell
of a house encompasses external rooms
for our body, the shell of our body
encompasses the interior rooms of our
thought. We rummage through the attics
of our houses. The idea of house is the
idea of forever.*

John Hejduk in Kim Shkapich (ed.),
*John Hejduk: Mask of Medusa: Works
1947–1983* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985),
p. 123

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Summary

Vernacular and cross-cultural examples of dwellings are explored in order to illustrate the complexity of human habitation and to suggest ways in which houses can carry cultural information in their material form and space configuration, and in the disposition of household artefacts within the domestic interior. It is proposed that the analysis of domestic space configuration provides the link between the design of dwellings and their social consequences, and an outline is given of the methodological approach which will be adopted in succeeding chapters. The major themes of the book are introduced.

The most complex building

The publication of *The Social Logic of Space* in 1984¹ was the culmination of a decade of research into the lawfulness of space created for human social purposes. At that stage, the aim was to expound a general theory of what was inherent in the nature of space that might render it significant for human societies and how space might, in principle, be shaped to carry cultural information in its form and organisation. The book was deliberately wide-ranging in content, reflecting the variety of spatial behaviours which human societies exhibit, practices which any powerful theory of space organisation would need to account for.

In the ensuing decade, our understanding of the significance of space in structuring social relations has been greatly increased by empirical research. Much more is now known about the effects which the physical form and structure of the urban grid have on observed patterns of human co-presence and movement, and about how large building complexes accommodate the programmed and unprogrammed activities of organisations. Our research has now confirmed that the spatial measure of how integrated or segregated a particular space is within a building or a settlement is a powerful predictor of how busy or quiet it is likely to be. Integration is the key by which we can understand the social content of architecture and show how buildings and places function at a collective level. This is not a naive 'architectural determinism' which says that buildings and places compel people to behave in particular ways. The effects which we have identified are from spatial patterns to patterns of movement among collections of people, which arise from everyone going about their business in a very ordinary way.

In parallel to the more public programme of research at the urban scale and into the buildings for work, welfare and leisure which shape most people's experience of architecture, systematic investigation has continued over the past two decades into the ways in which people's dwellings embody and express cultural and lifestyle preferences. The dwelling is the original building historically, and a universal building type today. Nearly everyone has some kind of a place to live, so everyone feels entitled to a view on what counts as good design in housing and what as bad. Nowhere is the relationship between architecture and life so passionately debated as in the association between house form and culture.

Houses everywhere serve the same basic needs of living, cooking and eating, entertaining, bathing, sleeping, storage and the like, but a glance at the architectural record reveals an astonishing variety in the ways in which these activities are accommodated in the houses of different historical periods and cultures. The important thing about a house is not that it is a list of activities or rooms but that it is a pattern of space, governed by intricate conventions about what spaces there are, how they are connected together and sequenced, which activities go together and which are separated out, how the interior is decorated, and even what kinds of household objects should be displayed in the different parts of the home. If there are principles to be learned from studying the design of dwellings, they do not yield easily to a superficial analysis of 'basic human needs'.

It is, moreover, in the history and evolution of houses that the distinction between 'architecture' and 'building' is almost impossible to side-step and, for some authors, 'architecture' – superior, elitist, high-style – as opposed to 'building' – inferior, popularist, vernacular – is a sub-text to the views that are voiced.² In looking at houses we are frequently invited to make formal and aesthetic judgements, as well as judgements about fitness for purpose. In non-residential buildings of a public nature it is normal to speak of good and bad architecture, taking for granted that the nature of architecture is well-understood. In discussing the design of houses, what is meant by 'architecture' is called into question by almost every statement uttered.

The house is therefore an ideal vehicle for exploring the formal and experiential dimensions of architecture, hence the attraction of houses for the great twentieth century architects whose continued interest in generating housing prototypes demonstrates that the intellectual challenge of the archetype is limitless. At the same time, the everyday familiarity of the house renders it apparently so innocuous that architecture teachers tend to locate a proposition for the design of a house early in the sequence of student projects. The same brief for a house may generate solutions of breathtaking sophistication and mind-numbing banality. Domestic character and small physical scale apparently are deceptive, and a little reflection suggests that the house is perhaps the most complex building of all.

The deceptive and inherent complexity of the dwelling may go some way to account for its central place in the evolution of 'space syntax' theory. The first studies of domestic space organisation pre-dated our excursions into configurational analysis and, at just about every stage, developments in

theory and research methodology have been spearheaded by pilot studies on samples of houses, several of which are published here for the first time. Research into the ethnographic record has been complemented by a study of the evolution of domestic space organisation and family structure in Britain, and by accounts of historic houses and examples of innovative, contemporary domestic architecture. An extensive database of housing from all over the world has been accumulated over the years, in the work of our graduate and research students. *Decoding Homes and Houses* now makes this material public, by bringing together for the first time in one volume historical, contemporary and cross-cultural studies of dwellings with interpretations of modern, architect-designed homes.

Primitive huts and elementary buildings

In its elementary form, human habitation embodies fundamental spatial gestures such as those which pertain among the !Kung bushmen of the Kalahari Desert³ described by Marshall:

The fire is the clearest visible symbol of the place of residence. One can see who lives at each. Always, summer and winter, every nuclear family has its fire, which is kept burning all night. . . . The fire is the nuclear family's home, its place to be. In a way, a fire is a more unchanging home than a house on a spot of ground from which the family might depart. A fire-home is always where the family is. Fires are constant, shelters are whims. . . . It takes the women only three-quarters of an hour to an hour to build their shelters, but half of the time at least the women's whim is not to build shelters at all. In this case they sometimes put up two sticks to symbolise the entrance to the shelter, so that the family may orientate itself as to which side is the man's side and which is the women's side of the fire. Sometimes they do not bother with the sticks.⁴

Simple as this fire-home is, it embodies a set of spatial concepts which gives the lie to the architectural notion of the 'primitive hut' as a sort of 'portable cave' which expressed only the bare essentials of human existence – shelter, cooking, warmth. Although the boundary of the fire-home is unclear, space is nonetheless differentiated into an inside zone for the family members and a surrounding region outside where people may pass by. The fire-home forms a semicircle, orientated by sticks and sometimes

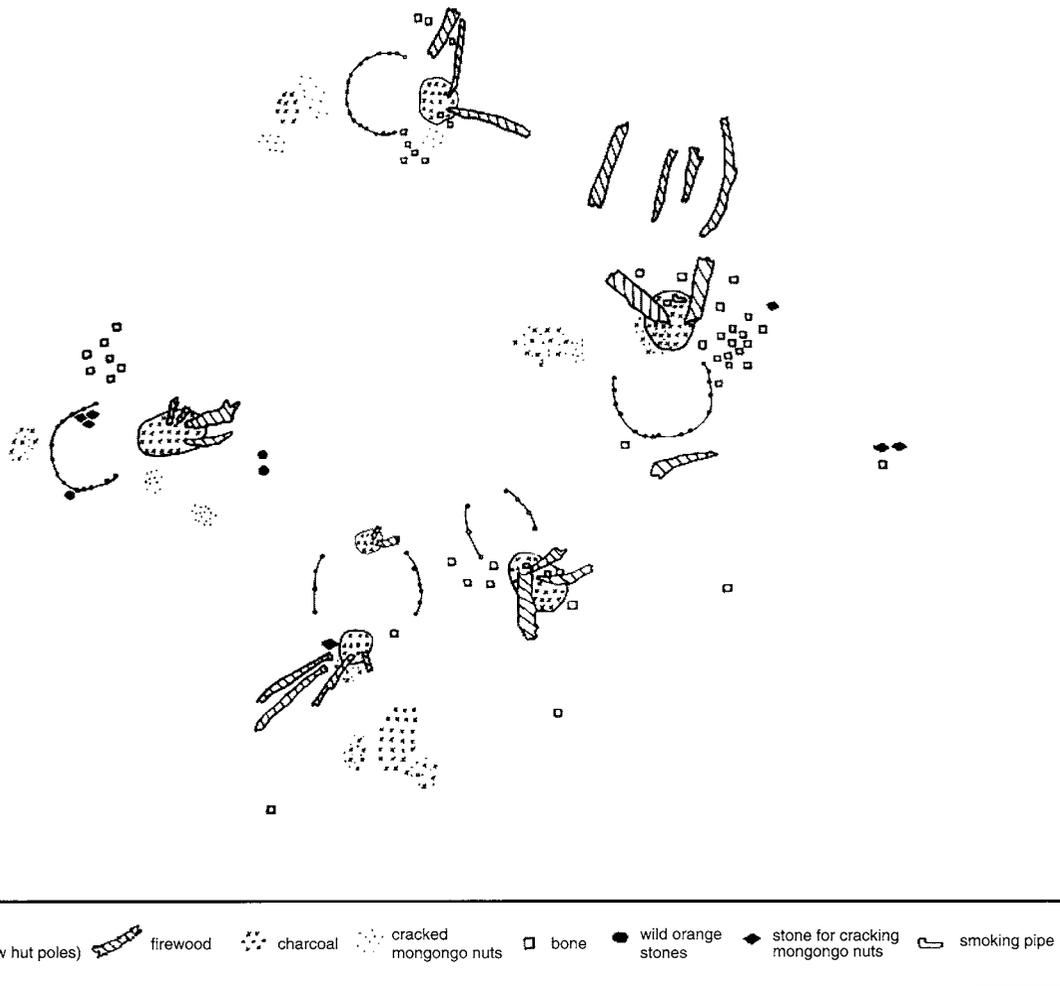


Figure 1.1
!Kung bushman's encampment

defined by a rough framework of woven, grass-covered branches along a front-back axis. The sticks also mark the threshold, and entrance to the dwelling. The space within is laterally delineated into the woman's space to the left and the man's, to the right. Belongings hang in an adjacent tree (see figure 1.1).

!Kung dwellings may be analysed and understood according to several binary oppositions acting in concert to categorise space: inside-outside, front-back, left-right, up-down. By contrast, no exogenous concept like shape or orientation to the compass governs the layout of the encamp-

ment. Shelters take up any direction, facing each other, back to back or side by side, touching or non-contiguous, seemingly as the fancy dictates.⁵ The only detectable principles are those of proximity and centrality. Within the encampment, fire-homes huddle closely in an arrangement which has been likened to a 'swarm of bees', as close as two arms' length apart so that neighbours can hand things to each other. Family dwellings tend to hug the periphery of the campsite, leaving an empty space between them which belongs to no one in particular, but where collective activities such as dancing or the distribution of meat take place.

In !Kung living arrangements, a simplicity of material culture and architectural expression are used to convey complex social information which goes well beyond the bare necessities to support human existence. Wherever we look in the ethnographic record, the evidence suggests that, even at its most simple, human shelter is already complex and imbued with a sense of purpose which the French prehistorian Leroi-Gourhan has referred to as the 'domestication' of space and time.⁶

It has even been suggested that this is why the idea of the 'primitive hut' has been central to architectural history. It is the attempt by succeeding generations of theorists to articulate the primary ideas in which architectural forms have their origin, and therein to give substance to the elementary building blocks out of which the most elaborate architectural statements may be assembled. As Rykwert⁷ has observed, 'The primitive hut will . . . retain its validity as a reminder of the original and therefore essential meaning of all building for people: that is, of architecture. It remains the underlying statement, the irreducible, intentional core.' This definition is similar to the morphological concept of an 'elementary building' as we tried to define it in *The Social Logic of Space*. In common with those architects who have been preoccupied with the idea of the first house, the specification for an elementary building is an attempt to build a model of the irreducible structure from which all buildings spring. Unlike most previous attempts to speculate on the origins of architecture, the elementary building is not a form drawn from the archaeological record or from ethnography, but a logical construct in space and time.

The elementary building as it was defined in *The Social Logic of Space* is a closed or bounded cell related by a permeability to a contiguous open cell or space outside. The open segment of space may be traversed, while the closed cell is a dead end. The closed and open cells were seen as made

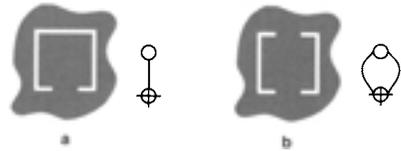


Figure 1.2
The representation of the elementary building

up of two kinds of raw material: continuous space and the stuff of which boundaries are made, which has the effect of creating spatial discontinuities. In arriving at an ideographic language for architecture, space organised for social purposes was viewed as neither purely continuous nor purely bounded, but some conversion of the spatial continuum by a system of boundaries and permeabilities, to effective space organised for human social purposes (see figure 1.2).

Sociologically speaking, the elementary building was identified with at least one 'inhabitant', in the sense of a person with privileged rights of access and control of the category of enclosed space created by the boundary. An inhabitant was defined as, if not a permanent occupant of the closed cell, at least an individual whose social existence is mapped into the category of space within the cell and thus, strictly speaking, more of an inhabitant of the social knowledge defined by the cell than of the cell itself.

All buildings were then seen as selecting from the set of possible 'strangers' in the external universe, a sub-set of 'visitors' who were defined as persons who may enter the building temporarily, but who do not control it. If the closed cell is the domain of an inhabitant, the open space is the locus of the 'interface' between inhabitant and visitor. Every building is therefore at least a domain of knowledge, in the sense that it is a spatial ordering of categories and at the same time a domain of control, in the sense that it is a certain ordering of boundaries, which together constitute a social interface between inhabitants and visitors.

A building may therefore be defined abstractly as a certain ordering of categories, to which is added a certain system of controls, the two conjointly constructing an interface between the inhabitants of the social knowledge embedded in the categories and the visitors whose relations with them are controlled by the building. All buildings, of whatever kind, have this abstract structure in common: a building type typically takes these fundamental relations and, by varying the syntactic para-

meters and the interface between them, bends the fundamental model in one direction or another, depending on the nature of the categories and relations to be constructed by the ordering of space.⁸

Finally, it was suggested that all buildings, of which dwellings are a type, are elaborations on this most basic, irreducible spatial structure, which is already redolent with sociological meaning.

The elementary building can be represented graphically, in order to clarify its relational structure (see figure 1.2). The interior may be conceptualised as a point and represented by a circle, with its relations of permeability represented by lines linking it to others. Thus, a cell with one entrance can be thought of as an unipermeable point (see figure 1.2a) while a cell with more than one entrance can be conceptualised as a bipermeable point (see 1.2b). The unbounded open space, immediately outside the cell in the vicinity of the threshold can also be considered as a point, and represented by a circle with a cross to distinguish it from the bounded interior space of the cell.

Elementary buildings in this pure, logical state are found rarely, if they have ever existed, though one rather obvious and instructive candidate is the hermit's cell. Those who wished to live an eremitic life often sought to inhabit a simple closed cell, located in an inhospitable environment at the margins of human habitation. The intention was to lead a solitary life of religious contemplation. In this sense, the hermit's cell is the purest realisation of the domain of an inhabitant. Paradoxically, to the extent that the hermitage succeeded in becoming a place of veneration, a steady stream of pilgrims would recreate the inhabitant–visitor interface, in the vicinity of the entrance to the cell. A holy man's power was seen as emanating from a particular place to such an extent that people often felt a compulsion to visit or a fear of passing by. Pilgrims would not be visitors in the socially accepted sense, for they were seeking counsel, prophecy, intercession or bodily healing from the hermit within. Occasionally the relationship would be directed from the hermit to his visitors in the form of 'action at a distance' activated by cursing, a rather extreme illustration of the general notion that the hermit was 'set apart' from the everyday world of social interaction and encounter. As a manifestation of the logical categories of inhabitant and visitor, the spatial set-up is suggestive.

A hermit's cell is a pure illustration of the theoretical type, but it is a far

from typical example of human habitation. However, the ethnographic record provides us with a rich source of portable dwellings from nomadic cultures which, whilst not the earliest forms of habitation, often require considerable technical sophistication and provide a living link with the dwellings of our pre-settled ancestors. Tents are deceptively simple. The space is not large and a nomad's possessions are necessarily few, since they must be transported, but the economy of their material form may be supported by an elaborate system of social practices, which builds upon the concepts inherent in the elementary building and which finds its expression in forms of spatial categorisation and control.

Figure 1.3 illustrates three simple, cell-like tent structures of nomadic tribesmen, reproduced from *The Social Logic of Space* and as described by Torvald Faegre in his study of nomadic architecture.⁹ The Bedouin black tent (see figure 1.3a) shows a basic structure, to which key details must be added if the logic of the interior is to be fully understood.

A stranger must approach the tent from the front, which is usually orientated to the south or east. The tent is divided into two by a curtain. The smaller and more opulent men's side is covered with carpets and mattresses. The larger, more functional women's area is used for living and working. The host's camel saddle is set on the mattress in the deepest part of the men's side, and the host and guest of honour sit either side and talk across it, whilst less important guests sit in a semicircle facing them. The space outside is a place for prayer, an activity which ensures that, according to Bedouin cultural conventions, it is a male-dominated space. Although the rules governing hospitality are extremely strong – a Bedouin must entertain even his sworn enemies for three days – there is a strong prohibition on guests seeing into the women's side of the tent.

The abstract rule system which this system encapsulates is extremely clear. Inhabitant–visitor status is manifested on the dimension of depth into the domestic interior, in that the principal host–guest pair occupy the deepest space within the tent. Not only this, access to the open space at the front of the tent is denied to women and reinforced through religious restrictions on its use, so that the inhabitant–visitor interface is controlled by men. The inhabitant–inhabitant relation – that between men and women – is realised in segregation, effected through the strength of the boundary between their respective domains.

If we compare this with a typical Teda mat tent (see figure 1.3b) from the Berber tribes of the southern Sahara, again taken from Faegre¹⁰ and

Figure 1.3
A comparison of the plans of three tents

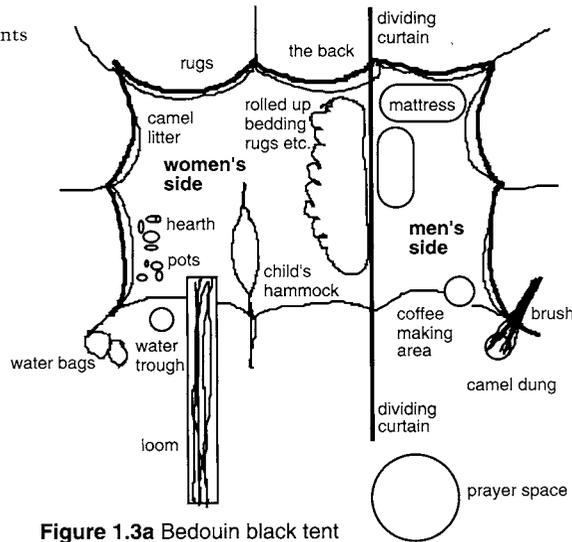


Figure 1.3a Bedouin black tent

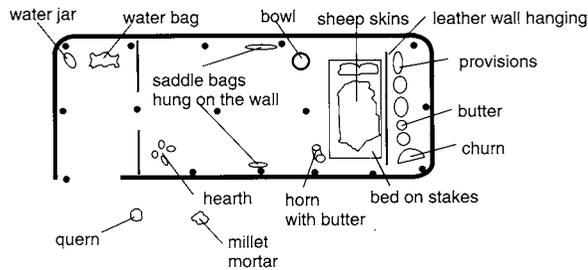


Figure 1.3b Teda mat tent

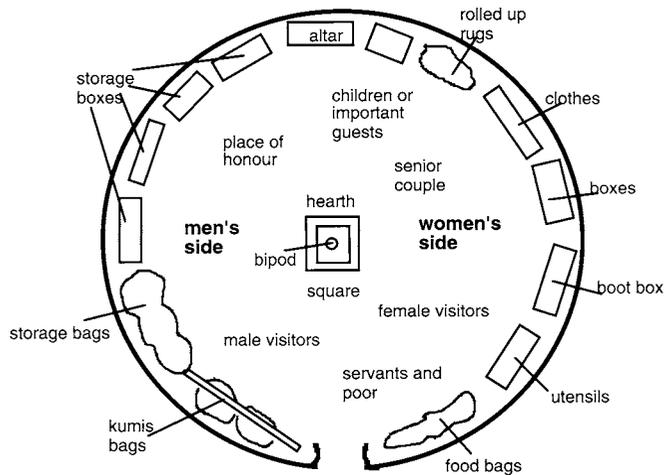


Figure 1.3c Mongolian yurt

supplemented by reported descriptions of household practices, we find a great contrast. First, although mat tents tend to be orientated towards the west, the space outside is not a ritual space but a practical one. As Faegre says:

Mats are often stretched well out in front of the tent, making an enclosure courtyard that is an extension of the space inside the tent. The hearth is set in this space . . . just outside the tent are placed the wooden millet mortar and the stone quern for grinding grain, while the goatskin churn and water bags are suspended from tripods nearby.¹¹

These functions are more orientated to women's work than to masculine activities, and both they and their men folk receive their guests in the space outside the tent, where the family spends the greater part of its time.

The distinction between men and women is not made inside the family home, rather the interior is organised to follow culinary practices. Water jars are stored at one end of the tent and a bed is set up at the other end. In small tents this takes up much of the floor area. Behind the bed is an elaborate leather hanging which is the most valuable item of the bride's trousseau, and is made for her wedding by her mother and female relatives. This hanging serves to divide the living space from an adjacent storage area where the various milk products which make up the subsistence diet are kept.

In both its interior organisation and in its relation to settlement space, Berber social conventions lack the strong exogenous model which characterises Bedouin domestic space organisation. Women are not separated from men within the domestic interior, and control of the space outside is neutral with respect to its use by men and women. Visitors are not differentiated according to their different roles and statuses. Nonetheless, Teda domestic space is still well-structured. Properly speaking, it builds upon the minimal structure of the elementary building. The interior–exterior dimension distinguishes inhabitants from visitors through an intermediary threshold space, but no internal structure differentiates different categories of inhabitant. The space outside serves to interface inhabitants and visitors, the interior separates people from things.

It therefore comes as no great surprise to learn that the Teda have an entirely different system of social relations between men and women. Teda women own their tents and all the interior furnishings. Not only are

they a matriarchal society, but the women have a highly developed craft industry – the leather work that dominates the interior decoration of the tent. They are famous as warriors, may divorce their husbands at will and it is even said that they take the initiative in sexual matters. As Faegre observes, the status of Teda women is a constant source of irritation to their Arab neighbours. Berber liberation is amply demonstrated in their virtual reversal of the spatial model of the Bedouin tent.

Moving half way round the world, the Mongolian yurt¹² is comparable to the Berber mat tent in its lack of interior subdivisions, but comparable to the Bedouin black tent in the development of its internal organisation. Within the yurt, everyone and everything 'has its place' (see figure 1.3c). The entrance always faces south or south-east. Entering, it is considered impolite to step on the threshold. Opposite the entrance, against the north wall in the deepest space from the door, is the household shrine. To the west lies the men's side, whilst to the east is the women's side. The centre of the yurt is marked by the hearth, while around the perimeter household objects are stored. The tent is further divided into named sections, within which status and gender dictate the correct situation of people and storage of things. Household implements are physically associated with their users. Men's objects – saddles, guns and ropes – lie in their accustomed places within the men's domain, whilst women's possessions – churns, cooking implements and cradles – are placed in an invariant order around the women's side of the yurt. Guests are seated in the 'place of honour' on the men's side and to the rear of the central hearth, out of the cold. Children and animals sit close to the door. Traditional nomad hospitality requires that anyone who stops outside the entrance to the yurt is invited inside to eat. When strangers enter the dwelling, they will find that the relative position of people and things is identical to all other yurts, right across the steppes.

Mongols persistently categorise objects and people in terms of their position in space. People and things 'out of place' constitute 'pollution', so much so that it is often necessary to conduct a special ceremony to restore the purity of the home. Family life is organised in an exceptionally rigid and formal manner so that, although people may move about within the yurt, all forms of social interaction are ritualised and people have to sit, eat and sleep in their appointed place. The spatial structure guarantees a powerful model for the categories of spatial being, and organises the daily life of its occupants.

So strong is the symbolic structure of the yurt that through the centuries it has come to represent the cosmology of its inhabitants. To the Mongols, the roof is the sky, and the hole in the roof the sun – the Eye of Heaven. The central hearth is regarded as an embodiment of the five elements from which all life springs: earth on the floor, wood in the framework enclosing the hearth, metal in the grate, water in the kettle on the grate, and fire in the hearth itself. Each morning, as a libation is poured over the hearth, the vapours mingle with the smoke and rise to heaven. The interior of the dwelling is synonymous with a microcosm of the universe, held in common with all other yurt dwellers. The model includes the relationship between people and their gods, and is confirmed by the existence of an ‘altar’ in the deepest, most sacred space of the yurt.

The organisation of the yurt has key elements in common with the !Kung encampment. The elaboration of the ‘elementary building’ is based on its sectioning according to the spatial dimensions of front–back, left–right, high–low, centre–periphery. But in contrast to the !Kung, among the Mongols every aspect of position is developed in terms of social difference, within these broad dimensions. Depth from the yurt’s entrance indicates differences in rank for both inhabitants and visitors, culminating in the ‘altar’ at the rear of the yurt, in the deepest space of all. At the same time, differentiated regions within the interior record every possible difference in status among household members and guests, whether by gender, age or degree of wealth. The centre marks the focus of the dwelling, the hearth, and the perimeter regulates the disposition of household objects. Yet all this is done without boundaries of any kind.

The yurt is an extreme development of a structured interior which is brought into being, not by the multiplication of boundaries, but by their elimination.

Here everything is synchronised: but above all the relationships of inhabitants to each other are synchronised and made parallel to the relations between inhabitants and visitors, and both are realised in a powerful and complex model which depends on the non-existence of boundaries. The yurt is a structural interior that is maximally orientated towards the global structure of society: it builds its local relationships in the image of society as a whole.¹³

The effect of all this is to make the rank of each member of society absolutely explicit by manipulating their relative positions in space,

whilst at the same time stressing an identity among all yurt dwellers which is embodied in shared practices and values.

Compounds and townships

Houses articulate relations between social groupings, not individuals, and so most dwellings, however simple, are already elaborations of the elementary building. The forms of habitation which we have considered so far have been relatively stable in their internal layout over time, but in many cultures dwellings take on a dynamic aspect, growing, partitioning and eventually fissioning and re-forming, in a cyclical pattern dictated by the evolving composition of the domestic group. Under these conditions, the 'fit' between the internal organisation of the space of the dwelling presents a fairly precise map of the social relations of the members of the household. As the composition of the dwelling group changes, the use of rooms may change, or rooms are added or demolished accordingly.

This has led to an important distinction within the archaeological and ethnographic record between circular hut compounds and villages of rectangular houses. Compounds or homesteads are locally organised collections of circular, single-cell huts linked together by a wall: houses are globally organised and planned arrangements of rectangular rooms within a rectilinear boundary. In some cases, the house may consist of rooms grouped around three or four sides of a courtyard in what amounts to a modular layout. Flannery has even suggested that these two forms of habitation are the outward manifestation of different systems of social and political organisation.¹⁴

A typical compound consists of a male elder – the compound head – together with his wives and their young children, unmarried adult daughters, adult sons and their wives and children, and occasionally the elder's widowed mother. The concept of the 'family' is not spatialised in a single dwelling. Rather, each of the constituent huts of the compound is designed to house one, or at the most two individuals. The same space may also serve to house children or livestock. Additional huts may be used for storage, cooking, animals, or for the reception of guests. Thus, the number of people in a compound is likely to be somewhat less than the number of its constituent cells.

The cells are frequently arranged in a rough circle or oval surrounding a cleared space where most of the work of the inhabitants is carried out.

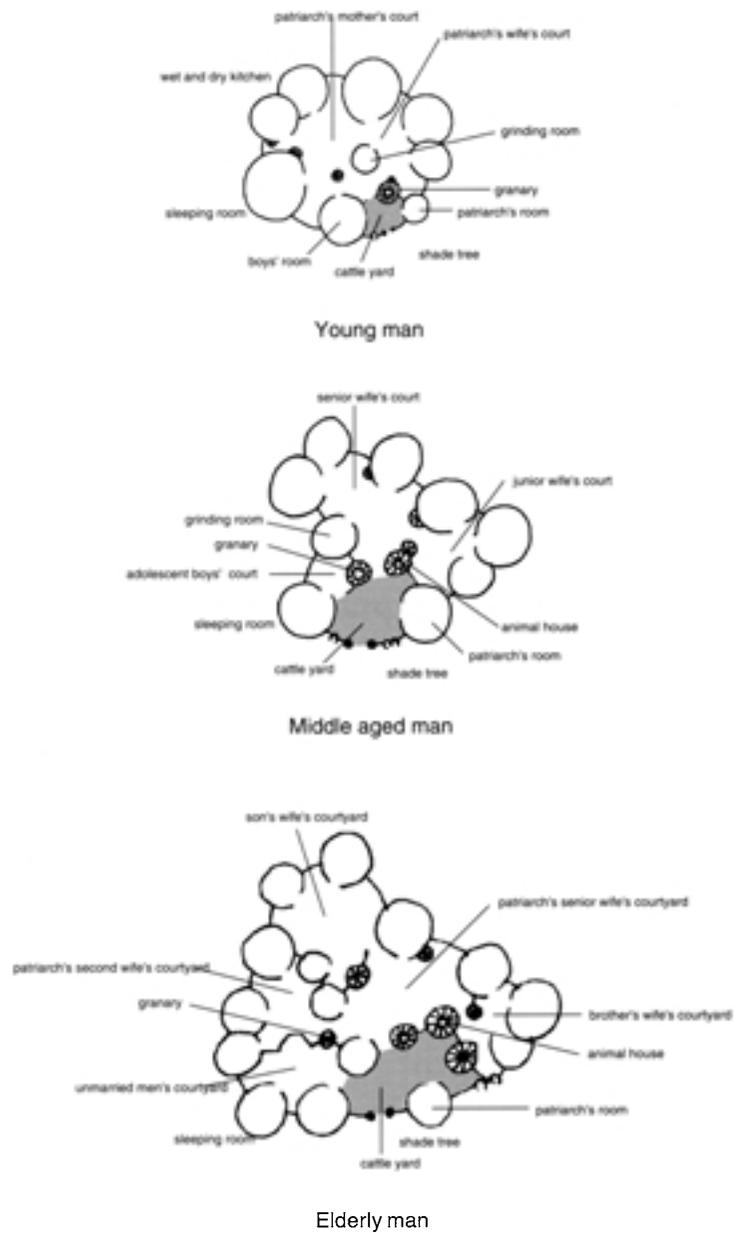
Often, walls are raised between the huts so that the boundary of the compound is secured. Some cultures group huts together systematically within the compound. In many cases, food storage is shared by all the members of a compound, though food may still be prepared and consumed separately.

Rectangular houses, by contrast, are designed from the outset to accommodate a family rather than individuals, though the precise definition as to who counts as 'family' may vary widely between cultures. A common though by no means invariant family grouping is a man, his wife or wives and their unmarried children, and their more distant single or widowed relations. Occasionally, siblings and their families may share a house – an expanded family or horizontal lineage – or a married child and his family may share with parents – an extended family or vertical lineage. Each house has its own food storage, and some have walled courtyards so that work space is not shared between households.

Both compounds and houses may accommodate change within the domestic group, but compounds are particularly responsive to processes of growth and fission within the domestic group. A striking example of this spatial dynamic which, in common with many of the dwellings in this introductory chapter was referred to in *The Social Logic of Space*¹⁵ and which has had a significant part to play in building our theoretical spatial models, is to be found in the domestic compounds of the Tallensi of Northern Ghana, as their way of life was depicted by Fortes in the 1940s and 1950s¹⁶ and by Prussin in the 1960s.¹⁷ Tallensi compounds differ considerably in size and complexity, but they are always based on a strong underlying model which can be seen in figure 1.4.

The basic, irreducible unit of Tallensi society is the homestead, a compound made up of simple, circular, mud-built huts with thatched roofs joined together by a perimeter wall. The space in the vicinity of the entrance is marked by a boabab or 'shade' tree, and ancestor shrines. The entrance, in spite of being the only way in for the entire household, is usually dirty and untidy. It gives into a small cattle yard, which has only one room facing onto it. This is the headman's personal space, though he rarely uses it for any purpose other than to keep his belongings in. More important, it is also said to be the abode of his ancestors' spirits. Both the space outside the compound and the cattle yard are strongly identified with males, and this identification is reinforced by prescriptions which derive their authority from religious observances. Transactions between

Figure 1.4
Tallensi compounds



homesteads take place under the shade tree, and are likewise under the control of men.

The words for homestead and the people who live there are the same in the Tallensi language. The Tallensi are a patrilineal and patrilocal society,