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PREVIEW

**Order Number 9304858**

**The architecture of power: Spatial and social order in seven  
Rhode Island mill villages**

**Berry, Susan J., Ph.D.**

**University of California, Berkeley, 1992**

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PREVIEW

The Architecture of Power: Spatial and Social  
Order in Seven Rhode Island Mill Villages

By

Susan J. Berry

B.A. (University of California at Berkeley) 1976  
M.A. (Brown University) 1979

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ANTHROPOLOGY

in the

GRADUATE DIVISION

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA at BERKELEY

Approved:

Chair:

..... *William S. Swinerton* ..... *March 20, 92.*  
..... *James H. Lee* ..... Date *March 19, 1992*  
..... *Daly* ..... *3/20/92*

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**THE ARCHITECTURE OF POWER:  
SPATIAL AND SOCIAL ORDER IN SEVEN RHODE ISLAND MILL VILLAGES**

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**Susan J. Berry**

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PREVIEW

## Chapter One

### Introduction

In this dissertation I examine the interplay of structure, ideology, and architectural design in seven company-owned textile mill villages in Rhode Island. I focus in particular on changes in community, class, and household structure and on the role which architecture played in implementing these changes.

Although bounded in space (Rhode Island's Blackstone and Saugatucket River valleys) and time (1805 to the present), my study addresses issues of general concern to material culture scholars and social historians. Its central argument is that material phenomena need not be viewed as merely "expressing" ideology or "reflecting" social structure. They may also be understood as instruments through which ideology is articulated and social order constructed, reproduced and transformed. In speaking of the architecture of power, then, I refer both to the structuring of power relations and to the role that architectural design plays in this process. More precisely, I examine *how* spatial design helps order social relations.

My primary purpose in advancing this argument is to advocate a broader approach than that usually taken in interpreting material culture. Like other material data, spatial artifacts (buildings, streets, town plans) are most often interpreted either as reflections of more fundamental social phenomena or as symbolic expressions of a particular ideology. To employ Marxist terminology, they are assigned to the realm of "superstructure" rather than productive "base".

Although analyses that adopt this perspective are often insightful, they fail to capture what Ian Hodder refers to as the "active" quality of material phenomena (Hodder 1986:61). A more compelling approach, and one which better captures this dynamic dimension, looks at material culture as a constitutive element of social

processes. It understands material phenomena as part of the "base", and it explores the dynamics that link material phenomena with social and cultural processes.

This interest in exploring material culture's active quality guided my choice of mill village architecture as a research topic. The company-owned factory community seemed an ideal site in which to investigate the relationship between spatial and social order. The very nature of an employer-owned settlement suggested that connections between ideology, social structure and architectural design could be traced more readily than in other, less rigidly governed communities. In the Rhode Island mill village, monopoly control of village property meant that the capitalists who employed workers and set community social policy also directed the construction of the village landscape. Some mill village proprietors even designed particular buildings themselves, although the more regular practice was to hire local builders or, in the latter part of the 19th century, professional engineers. In either event, factory owners financed and supervised village design. They oversaw the construction of all buildings from the factory itself to churches, recreational facilities and workers' housing.

This supervisory power with respect to the design of village space was matched by an unusually direct influence over the shaping of community social order. Through hiring practices and company policies establishing standards for workers' personal conduct, Rhode Island factory owners encouraged (not always deliberately) particular kinds of family, class, ethnic and community structures. The heavy reliance on child labor during the early decades of textile production, for example, produced residential units featuring groups of unrelated children living together under the supervision of one or more adults. In the decades following the close of the Civil War, a policy of hiring immigrants at wages not much above those paid child workers resulted in the establishment of extended households of frequently changing composition that

incorporated friends, co-nationals and other non-kin. Towards century's end, social reformers attacked these households as immoral arrangements and convinced manufacturers to initiate programs of domestic education that would teach village residents the fundamentals of 'decent' nuclear family life. Such structuring and restructuring of the domestic order always had an architectural component: the types of workers' housing built and their arrangement in the landscape supported certain kinds of domestic units and articulated specific orderings of family relations.

Still, neither monopoly ownership of village property nor status as sole employer granted textile manufacturers exclusive control over social or spatial order. Mill village residents had a say in the constitution of community life, and they exercised their influence through daily practices as well as in organized protests. Even in a company-owned factory town, where opposing class positions seemed so clearly delineated and the asymmetrical allocation of wealth and personal influence so great, power dynamics were not reduced to a matter of one group exercising control over another.

This is true in part because the very exercise of power generates resistances. But it is also true because power does not operate in so bold and direct a fashion. Everyone, manufacturers, managers and workers alike, was caught up in power's operations; everyone acted as both its agent and its target.

An analysis of the architecture of power in company mill villages therefore must come to grips with how power insinuates itself into social life, with how it produces its effects in the most mundane interactions and ordinary activities. Only then can it examine how architecture facilitates power's operations.

### *Power*

My understanding of the constitution of power relations in industrial Rhode Island relies most heavily on the theory of power developed by Michel Foucault. Foucault explains power as a pervasive aspect of social life, "produced at every moment in every action" (Hodder 1986:66) and intimately invested in the practices of everyday life. In fact it is in what he terms "the immediate social entourage" of day-to-day life as lived in the home, workplace, and school, that power "installs itself and produces its real effects" (Foucault 1980:97).

Power, then, is not a repressive force imposed from above upon a malleable population. It is instead generated *within* the social body, in the "scattered locales" and "minor processes" of daily social experience. Working through norms rather than legal codes, power relies for its implementation on judgments and self-assessments, not the dictates of an external authority.

In analyzing power's constitution, Foucault calls particular attention to the localized "power networks" of the body, of sexuality, family, kinship and technology. It is here, he argues, that the tactics of power are invented, organized, and deployed. "Between every point of a social body", he contends,

"between a man and a woman, between the members of a family, between a master and his pupil, between every one who knows and every one who does not, there exist relations of power which are not purely and simply a projection of the sovereign's great power over the individual; they are rather the concrete, changing soil in which the sovereign's power is grounded, the conditions which make it possible for it to function" (Foucault 1980:187).

Power is not formed out of a sovereign authority's will; neither does it exist to serve a primary class interest. It is constructed and functions on the basis of myriad localized

issues and effects.

These localized issues and effects, like the specific sites and institutions in which power operates, intersect, creating a series of "cross references and complementarities". Family, factory, school, and church -- all reinforce and support one another. In this manner, relations of power "are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) for which they play at once a conditioning and a conditioned role" (ibid:142).

The interconnections among these domains, the linkages among the localized sites where power establishes itself, in turn form the basis for more inclusive power strategies. As Foucault puts it, these linkages "delineate general conditions of domination, and this domination is organized into a more or less coherent and unitary strategic form". The "dispersed, heteromorphous, localized procedures of power" operating in the scattered locales of work, family, or community are then "adapted, reinforced and transformed by global strategies" (ibid:142).

For all their transformative capacity, however, "global strategies" remain grounded in localized power relations and the myriad specific sites of social experience. Even industrial capitalism, pre-eminent among global strategies, owes its existence to local practices. This is because strategies take shape in a piecemeal fashion, invented, organized, and deployed in specific sites and in response to local conditions. Localized practices make possible the exercise of power on a larger political scale.

### *Biopower, Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*

Foucault calls the type of power characteristic of modern western society "biopower" and its distinctive arsenal of tactics "disciplinary". Biopower concerns

itself both with populations and with the individuals that constitute populations. It specializes in governing, managing, and training bodies. Hospitals, prisons, cities, factories, and schools -- these are the sites and institutions where the effects of biopower are most concentrated and visible.

Yet biopower depends for its efficiency on, and is in fact grounded in, individual practices. "The effects of power", Foucault argues, move through "progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions" (ibid:151-152). They do this in part through the contact that individuals have with social institutions. But power's effects also insinuate themselves into daily life via a far-reaching disciplinary apparatus that incorporates the individual as at once its subject, object and agent. Individuals become in effect their own overseers, interiorizing disciplinary tactics and placing themselves under a constant vigilance that is at once more effective and more economical than any system of surveillance that a repressive political power could devise. The individual -- the conscience-driven subject animated by a soul and concerned with questions of moral conduct -- is biopower's most effective creation.

Foucault links the coalescence of biopower and the creation of "disciplinary society" to the expansion of industrial capitalism. The accumulation of capital and the accumulation of people, he observes, were part of a single process. Large-scale industrial production sustained expanding populations in urban and industrial centers, while sheer multiplicity (of both laborers and consumers) fueled capital accumulation and, hence, further industrial growth. The chief task confronting industrial capitalists was how best to turn this multiplicity to their economic advantage, producing *useful* populations and neutralizing the "effects of counterpower" inherent in restive masses.

They pursued this end through strategies of rank, hierarchy, distinction and



individualization. Classification and characterization, distribution and regulation, became the favored techniques for governing populations and making efficient use of multiplicity. Within the textile factory, for example, workers were classified by a system of rank that drew increasingly fine distinctions as the scale of production expanded. From superintendant, overseer, and assistant overseer on down to bobbin boy, each rank had its distinctive duties, privileges, and pay rate. Each was also invested with a carefully limited degree of supervisory authority over a specified group of workers. This system of diffused supervision made workers of all but the lowest rank simultaneously supervisors and supervised, both agents and targets of disciplinary procedures. In so doing, it allowed for a smoothly functioning economy of production that operated without recourse to an expensive use of force. And it permitted power to "install itself" at virtually every point within the work force.

The same disciplinary procedures being applied with ever greater precision within the factory were also brought to bear on intimate daily life. This was most evident in the domestic realm, where the reconstitution of working-class family life became a focal concern of manufacturers, government authorities, and social reformers during the latter part of the 19th century. They inveighed against the extra-kin households so prevalent in factory districts, advancing in their stead the privatized nuclear family with its careful delineation of rights, duties, and authority according to age and gender. Convinced that the home served as the training ground for useful citizens, manufacturers hired "welfare secretaries" to implement programs of domestic reform. Visiting workers' homes, setting up model dwellings, and teaching classes in child-rearing and domestic science, these company employees instructed village residents in the domestic tasks suitable to each member of the model nuclear family. They attempted to transform the family into a self-regulating social unit in which

disciplinary power infused every key relationship (husband and wife, parent and child).

Reform-minded manufacturers also organized various "self-improvement" programs emphasizing education, pragmatic strategies for individual advancement (such as learning how to budget expenditures), and adoption of "healthful" and "wholesome" leisure pursuits. These programs encouraged workers and their family members to develop their potential *as individuals* in a variety of areas -- as parents, homemakers, gardeners, amateur athletes or musicians. They aimed at producing conscientious, fully individuated, self-monitoring subjects with, in Foucault's phrase, "a will to work for the capitalist" -- a will complemented by an embrace of disciplinary procedures as enabling mechanisms with which to build a better life.

### *Power in Space*

"A whole history remains to be written of *spaces* -- which would at the same time be the history of *powers* -- from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations" (Foucault 1980:149).

Foucault accords architectural design an importance of the first order in the installation and exercise of disciplinary power. At once "effect and support" of biopower, spatial design ordered populations into governable units and made possible discipline's efficient use. As Foucault puts it, "the new form of power [was] spatializing", with "discipline proceed[ing] from the distribution of individuals in space" (Foucault 1979:141).

The connection between spatial and social order became particularly evident in the latter part of the 18th century with the emergence of a new architecture of populations. Architects (and, increasingly, engineers, sanitation professionals, and

other specialists in population management) turned their skills to designing prisons, hospitals, factories, even entire urban districts. Applying the twin principles of disciplinary architecture, enclosure and internal partitioning, they constructed spaces of surveillance and prevention, of segregation, hierarchy, and individuation. The spatial arrangements they produced, Foucault argues, played an integral role in creating the "ordered multiplicities" of modern industrial society.

The Rhode Island textile factory stands as a particularly impressive example of the sort of disciplinary architecture to which Foucault refers. Uniting the various activities of industrial production at a single site, and often under a single roof, the factory complex was a self-contained and containing space. Surrounded by a tall fence whose carefully monitored gates regulated entrance and egress, it was a space where enclosure minimized theft, outside interruptions, and unauthorized departures. Spatial partitioning within the factory complex likewise facilitated the operation of disciplinary procedures. Division into separate specialized departments, a grid-like arrangement of long, straight aisles along which workers were stationed at regular intervals, and the assignment of each worker to a particular set of machines formed a "serial", "cellular" space conducive to the creation of ordered multiplicity.

Although mill engineers designed factory layout to meet technological demands, they also infused productive space with disciplinary power; discipline was as integral a part of the productive process as were cotton, looms, and fuel. Spatial design facilitated an efficient supervision of labor that relied on continuous observation rather than coercive force. It restricted internal circulation and made an unauthorized absence from one's station immediately apparent. The placement in long parallel rows of workers of the same rank performing the same tasks invited comparison of individuals' output, speed, and efficiency. This in turn permitted supervisors to make

distinctions among workers (distinctions given material weight under a system of payment by piece rate) and to establish normative productive standards to which each worker was expected to adjust her or his own efforts. Even bodily orientation promoted engagement with one's work rather than with one's fellow workers. Factory operatives labored alongside one another, but in a space that actively discouraged fraternization.

As Foucault notes, disciplinary power installed itself in the nonexemplary, unexceptional locales of everyday life as well as in the great institutional spaces of industry and government. By the mid-19th century, I argue, it had made its effects evident in the mill village landscape. Even when located adjacent to another community, the company-owned mill village functioned as a self-contained enclave, set apart by a distinctive architectural plan that emphasized its status as a company-owned and run industrial settlement. In marked contrast to surrounding communities, mill villages were laid out in a strict grid, their straight streets lined with regularly (and closely) spaced houses of identical dimensions and appearance. Workers of the same rank and job classification were housed in the same blocks of dwellings, and superintendents' houses were located at major intersections and higher elevations affording a good view of workers' quarters. The mill village itself had become a landscape of biopower.

The mill worker's house likewise constituted an enclosed, partitioned space. Indeed, the history of industrial housing over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries is one of ever increasing enclosure and internal partitioning. Dwellings became more and more individuated, with multi-unit row housing and tenement blocks giving way to "cottages" designed for one or two families. Both within and outside the house, spaces shared by separate households diminished; by the end of the 19th century, common

sleeping quarters, hallways, stairs, and yards had been reassigned to individual family units. Enclosure privatized domestic space.

Internal partitioning also rearranged space in accordance with the new standards of domestic morality; parents, daughters, and sons were given separate bedrooms and distinct rooms were set aside for the performance of newly defined domestic roles. Believing that social reform was best achieved by transforming workers' family lives and personal habits, those active in what Foucault terms "the bourgeois campaign to moralize the poorer classes" saw in working-class housing an unparalleled opportunity to construct social order through the design of disciplinary space.

Foucault's theory of power thus informs my study in several important respects. His concept of biopower effectively captures the concern with managing populations and producing useful individuals that characterized social policy in Rhode Island mill villages. His insistence on locating the sources and effects of this power in the specific sites and individual practices of everyday life has particular relevance for a community-based study like my own. And his observations on how power insinuates itself into everyday life through the construction of spatial order supports my case for viewing material culture as a constitutive element of social processes.

### *Constructing Social Order through Cultural Strategies*

While Foucault presents a compelling thesis of power, its effects, and its deployment in space, he is not especially concerned with understanding how *particular* systems of power relations are produced and reproduced. Neither is he interested in probing the role of human agency in power's operations. As Anthony Giddens remarks, Foucault's vision of power seems to suggest that "human social affairs are determined by forces of which those involved are wholly unaware" (Giddens

1982b:222).

In investigating issues of structural formation and human agency, I therefore rely on other social theorists, most notably Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. I find their work useful not only because they directly address these questions, but also because in so doing they give special consideration to the role of cultural materials and social practices. And, although their perspective differs from Foucault's in a number of respects, it is essentially compatible with his in important ways. Like Foucault, Bourdieu and Giddens consider an understanding of the dynamics of power fundamental to the study of modern society. Also like Foucault, they emphasize the importance of investigating how the practices of everyday life enter into the constitution of these dynamics. And they, too, recognize spatial order and architectural design as essential components of the construction of social order.

In his writings on social class and cultural practice (Bourdieu 1977; 1984; 1990a; 1990b), Bourdieu highlights the fundamental role that culturally specific "strategies of distinction" play in structuring social relations. Classes, Bourdieu notes, are formed in relation to one another, with those relations in turn being the product of culturally constructed perceptions. A class is not an objective, autonomous entity, but a social category constructed on the basis of distinctions that agents make. It "begins to exist as such, for those who are part of it and for others too, only when it is distinguished. . . from other groups, that is, via cognition and recognition" (Bourdieu 1990a:138).

Social structures, of course, are not constructed entirely of cultural symbols and perceptions. A strategy's effectiveness relies to a great extent on how firmly the symbolic system it employs is grounded in 'objective reality' (economic relations, in the case of social classes, for example, or sexual differences in the case of gender

categories). Still, cultural distinctions do not merely replicate the 'given' structures of 'objective reality'. Revealing certain relations and concealing others, making "absolute all or nothing differences out of [the] infinitesimal differences" of objective reality (Bourdieu 1990b:137), people employ strategies of distinction to produce and reproduce, legitimate, modify and challenge, social structures. Bourdieu labels this ability to manipulate structure through the use of symbolic materials, to "impose a vision of divisions", "the political power *par excellence*" (Bourdieu 1990a:138).

### *Architecture and Strategies of Distinction*

By thus calling attention to the role that processes of distinction play in structural formation, Bourdieu awards material culture formidable influence in social life. As he notes, material objects offer a rich set of criteria with which to distinguish and order social groups. Distinctive styles of dress or housing, for example, create contrast and, when differentially distributed, accentuate differences among social groups. At the same time, they furnish a set of common cultural resources with which a particular group's social identity may be constructed. Strategies of distinction thus employ material objects to make manifest social groups and the hierarchies in which they are ordered. In the process, they transform these groups and hierarchies into recognizable entities with a real presence in social life. Divisions become visible and implicit structures explicit through the medium of material culture.

Architecture provides an especially effective means of imposing a "vision of divisions". With its contrasts in size, shape, material, siting, color, internal layout and exterior trim, architectural design articulates distinctions in a compelling fashion. Magnifying certain differences and diminishing others, it brings substance to the



classifications of social order.

Bourdieu's observations illuminate how architectural design helped shape the process of class structuration in Rhode Island mill villages during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the early decades of textile production (roughly 1800 through 1840), the mill village landscape gave little evidence of class divisions. But by the 1870s, distinctions originating within the hierarchy of workplace relations had become manifest in the village landscape. Most dramatically visible in the contrasting types of domestic structures built for workers of different rank, but apparent also in the layout of factories, neighborhoods, and public spaces, the Rhode Island mill village had become a landscape of social class.

I argue that this transformation of the industrial terrain played an integral role in shaping people's perception of the world in which they lived. Workers gained a new awareness of class that informed their interactions with one another, with their families and neighbors, and with their employers. Manufacturers, too, grasped the reality of class structure, recognizing (and worrying over) the existence of a permanent working class. While class structure did not originate within the postwar landscape, the articulation of class distinctions in village architectural design played an integral part in "translat[ing] economic relationships into non-economic social structures" (Giddens 1982a:157).

When class-conscious labor protests subsequently disrupted industrial operations, manufacturers again employed architecture as a means of restructuring social life. Now, however, the mill village landscape downplayed class distinctions in favor of a nostalgia-tinged orientation to community and family. The wholesale redesign of village layouts at the turn of the century created a new landscape of tree-lined streets and "cottages" clustered around a village green. Company-sponsored