Elisabeth Merchant

ARCH1900 – Response Paper 3

10/06/09

‘Above-ground archaeology’ examines both the architectural elements of and landscapes associated with the households to provide information about both the actual daily lives of the inhabitants and their symbolic understandings of their own places in the social order. The construction of the house and layout of the grounds conveys information about the practical needs of the builders, as well as information about the social status that the builders wanted to display.

Architectural remains of houses and landscapes can convey information about the practical needs of the inhabitants and their use of their space. King demonstrates this by showing physical evidence of the desire for protection found at both the Calvert and Patuxent Point plantations (in the form of a magazine (or ammunition store-house) and potential palisade erected by Calvert, and the physical evidence of a ritual to ward off witch-craft found at the Patuxent Point plantation)[[1]](#footnote-2). Additionally, physical archaeological evidence allows archaeologists and historians to separate daily realities from myths as Yentsch shows in her case studies, or even just further define individual differences in lifestyles, as Mrozowski does in his comparison of two Newport households.

Beyond giving us physical evidence of the realities of everyday life, both the architectural elements of a household and the material culture found there can provide us information about the inhabitants symbolic place in the social world order, both as perceived by the inhabitants themselves, and as perceived by both contemporary and modern others. The architectural elements of a house as well as the landscaping of the grounds act as a social display of status. Using the example from 18th century America, Leone demonstrates that a set of architectural rules can be applied to houses, which builders could work within to “produce a house that expressed how they saw life, neighbors, work, the rest of society, and their relation to the land”[[2]](#footnote-3). Leone describes the use of terraced or falling gardens as public displays of power, since they “could show effective command over natural law and demonstrate the larger political competence of disfranchised yet determined builders”[[3]](#footnote-4). This is an example of the structuralist interpretation of archaeology, which is based on a “paradigm for interpreting domestic archaeological materials, focusing not on what social groups *did* but what they *thought*”[[4]](#footnote-5) and considering the social messages which materials encode.

Critical archaeologists go a step further, interpreting archaeological materials from the view that “material culture [is] one form or symbol of social and political power, the analysis of which can reveal how some people assert power even as others resist”[[5]](#footnote-6). For example, critical archaeologists view the increasing popularity of scientific and musical instruments as not only as displays of wealth, but also as demonstrations of an ability to understand natural law, justifying social and economic inequalities[[6]](#footnote-7). When considered from this view, it is important to differentiate the dominant social view at the time from the views of the minority which might not be as clearly expressed in archaeological material, as the lower classes did not have the resources to send the same sorts of symbolic messages through their homes and material goods.

Additionally, the overall trends in the development of architectural styles and material culture can be interpreted to mirror broader social trends. Increasing consideration of privacy, use of modified materials and decreased emphasis on decoration and emotion all are interpreted to express a greater cultural desire for control in the chaotic post-revolutionary environment[[7]](#footnote-8). Additionally, material culture can be interpreted as indicative of broader social trends. Leone interprets increased occurrence of standardized dining ware as evidence of an increased emphasis on dining etiquette, an example of “work-discipline” and a “[celebration of] the self as an autonomous individual”[[8]](#footnote-9).

Examining archaeological sites today, such as the John Brown House, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which architectural elements and material culture can both speak to the daily realities of individuals and represent symbolic messages and social trends. In the latter sense, it is important to place archaeological finds in the context of the cultural atmosphere of the era, as Leone did in considering the messages inherent in the physical house itself, the material culture such as scientific instruments and place settings, and landscaping such as the hanging gardens. Consequently, the cultural atmosphere of Providence during the 18th century should be considered when interpreting the John Brown House. Doing so may allow us to interpret our archaeological finds as symbolic social displays, evidence of broader social trends, or merely practical considerations.

King, Julia A. 2006. Household archaeology, identities, and biographies. In D. Hicks and M. Beaudry, eds., The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeoloy. Cambridge: CUP, pgs. 293-313.

Leone, Mark P. 1988 The Georgian Order as the Order of Merchant Capitalism in Annapolis, Maryland. In M. Leone and P. Potter, Jr., eds, The Recovery of Meaning: Historical Archaeology in the Eastern United States. Smithsonian: Washington, 235-262.

Mrozowski, Stephen A. 2006 Shifting the focus: archaeology of the urban household, in The Archaeology of Class in Urban America. Cambridge: CUP, pgs. 36-62.

Yentsch, Anne. 1988 Legends, houses, families, and myths: relationships between material culture and American ideology. In M. Beaudry, ed. Documentary archaeology in the New World, CUP: Cambridge, 5-19.

1. King (2006) p. 293 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Leone (1988) p.236 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Leone (1988) p.256 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. King (2006) p. 300 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. King (2006) p. 301 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. King (2006) p. 302 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Leone (1988) p.236 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Leone (1988) p.246-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)