Alternative Pathways to Complexity

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I take my title from Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s address to the House of Commons on October 28, 1943, in the middle of World War II. The House of Commons was meeting then in the Lords Chamber; the Commons Chamber had been destroyed by German incendiary bombs (Parliament 2012). Churchill’s brief was to argue for an early rebuilding with two architectural stipulations. First, the new Chamber should retain its traditional oblong shape, eschewing a contemporary fad for semicircular form that, he contended, undermined the party system. A half-circle encourages mingling but the oblong forces Members to signal clearly their party allegiance and renders “crossing over” an act never to be undertaken without serious consideration. Second, the new Chamber should not easily accommodate all members and there should be no reserved desks. Here his case was that the intimacy and crowding of smaller spaces encouraged “episodes and great moments” and imparted a sense that, as he put it, “great matters are being decided, then and there.” Churchill’s purport was that no less than the future of British Parliamentary democracy would be shaped by how the Members shaped their new Chamber (Hansard 1943).

Churchill premised his case on the conviction that the material spaces people create have the effect thereafter of molding the lives of their creators. In 1994, Richard E. Blanton published an innovative monograph that is grounded in this same estimation. *Houses*
and Households: A Comparative Study is an unusual volume for an archaeologist but in its grand scope and unconventional methodology it is also classic Blanton. Just consider the numbers. To produce this comparative study of peasant domestic dwellings, Blanton hand coded an incredible 289 variables for 324 houses in 26 communities in China, Taiwan, Japan, Thailand, Java, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen, Egypt, Mexico, and Guatemala. The result is a unique and valuable database that enables the systematic, quantitative testing of theoretical propositions about houses and households over time and space and at multiple interacting levels of scale. But what most marks this work as a typical Blanton tour de force is its methodology. As in his work on world and regional systems (Blanton 1976), Blanton appropriates theories and techniques from outside of anthropology, retrofits them to new uses, observes the wonders that emerge, and then hastens to share these rich and novel possibilities with the rest of us.

TECHNOLOGIES OF COMMUNICATION

Despite its forays far afield, Houses and Households was solidly grounded in archaeological objectives. Blanton’s underlying goal was to improve inferences about the evolution of the state and its effects on the living standards of ordinary people such as might be derived from excavations of domestic structures. To that end, he had recourse to both contemporary ethnographic accounts of peasant housing and theories of the built environment, including the work of the Polish architect and city planner, Amos Rapoport. Like Churchill, Rapoport (1969) contended that houses, whether Houses of Parliament or the humble abodes of a peasant village, do far more than merely give shelter. They also impinge on human consciousness, they mold the world they contain, and they affect the larger world in which they themselves are contained. What makes these impingements, moldings, and containments possible, Rapoport and Blanton tell us, is that houses impart information; houses are in fact technologies of communication.

Two architectural communicative modes in particular are critical for Blanton’s analysis; he terms these the “canonical” and the “indexical.” Canonical communication takes place primarily in the intimate spaces of a house’s interior and its immediate surrounds. A house’s floor plan, for example, may bring people and activities together, may segregate them, or may simply define them. These interior delineations act to materially represent and so to reproduce the conventional or canonical social order. Indexical communication, on the other hand, occurs when a house is seen from outside. From this vantage point,
displays of cultural markers, emblems of achievement, and signs of taste differentiate and place—or index—the house’s inhabitants within a larger social order. In addition, a house’s design invites or discourages the flow of people between inside and outside, determining how easily those who dwell within mingle with those who do not.

But what makes Blanton’s work especially useful for social scientists is that he went beyond these insights to devise and adapt a practical, quantitative system for representing these qualitative spatial realities.

**BLANTON’S METHODOLOGY**

In Blanton’s words his spatial analytics comprise “a methodology, grounded in graph theory, that allows me to derive measures of scale, complexity, and integration of houses, in a manner facilitating cross-cultural comparison, and which could be applied to diachronic comparison” (Blanton 1994:23). This methodology, which builds on the ideas of spatial syntax such as those developed by Hillier and his colleagues (Hillier et al. 1976), begins by taking the simple data of a dimensionless floor plan and reducing it to a “planar graph consisting of nodes (or vertices) and edges” (Blanton 1994:26). Blanton’s graphical representations are dimensionless, incidentally, because surprisingly few published ethnographies included measurements. Nonetheless, working from the floor plan alone, he derived three useful metrics: scale, integration, and complexity.

- **Scale** is a measure of size as represented by the number of nodes, or “physically defined architectural spaces in the residential compound” (ibid.:52). The example in figure 11.1 has four nodes—three rooms plus the outside. This made it a very small house in Blanton’s sample, which had a mean of 10 nodes per house, with an impressive high of 19 for the Chinese houses and a low of 7 for the South Asian and Mesoamerican ones.

- **Integration** refers to the degree of linkage among the nodes or number of possible routes or circuits between rooms. The same number of rooms can be linked in multiple ways. For example, a builder who wants to economize but still have several rooms might end up with one of New Orleans’s linear “shotgun” houses. Adding in hallways, staging areas, stairs, and courtyards increases costs but also affords zones of privacy and functional differentiation. Blanton found a simple count of the number of circuits to be the most useful measure of integration. The example house of figure 11.1 has a single circuit because there is only one possible route to get from one room to another.
Complexity, the third measure, refers to a house’s internal differentiation and levels of accessibility. As Blanton points out, a house can have many rooms and still be quite simple if all rooms are entered off a central courtyard. But if some of the rooms can only be reached by going upstairs and then proceeding off a common landing the layout becomes significantly more complex, even though the number of rooms is unchanged. Blanton attached a numerical value to this variable by counting the number of links separating every pair of rooms or nodes, summing them for each room, and then rank ordering the sums. A lower rank indicates that a room is more easily reached than spaces with higher ranks.

Table 11.1 demonstrates this calculation for the figure 11.1 floor plan. This simple house has only two hierarchical levels: Room 1 is the most accessible space while the other spaces are less accessible, although none more so than another.

Armed with these tools, other data as available, and information about ornamentation and other communicative elements, Blanton compared domestic architecture across six geographic regions. For example, he found that houses in China, Nepal, and parts of the Middle East have more rooms or nodes, more differentiated internal circuits, and more complexity of function and hierarchical levels than do most houses in Mesoamerica and India (Blanton 1994:50–75). The peasant houses of China, Nepal, and parts of the Middle East also had more elaborate canonical communication—that is, internal differentiations that reinforce social distinctions—and greater expression of indexical indicators of wealth differences. In contrast, in Mesoamerica and in some areas of South Asia, canonical communication—practices designed to conserve and reproduce the social order—rested more in the public rituals.
of well-integrated communities than in the strong intergenerational control of private spaces (Blanton 1994:192–193). Blanton’s analysis chapters are rich in such observations and insightful interpretations. *Houses and Households* illustrates beautifully the power of controlled cross-cultural comparisons even when data are sparse and secondhand.

But what if one’s data are more abundant, the fruit of long-term field research and firsthand observation? Then Blanton’s analytical tools equip us to discern patterns amidst the inevitable surfeit of ethnographic detail. As it turns out, this is a complementary process: the minutiae of daily life may at times be distracting trees that blind us to the forest, but they are also important guides to the mechanisms that produce the order that Blanton helps us to see.

**NEW HOUSES IN WALANGAMA**

For me, *Houses and Households* has particular resonance. Since the mid-1970s, I have followed the improving fortunes of a rural Sinhalese community that I call Walangama, “Pottery Village,” nestled among the coconut estates that dominate the Kurunegala District of central Sri Lanka. Much of the old-fashioned village I first knew has slowly disappeared over the years, recast by a construction wave that has filled Walangama with modern houses quite different in appearance from those they displaced. Blanton’s ideas led me to ask: Does this changed architecture mean also changed socio-architectural effects? Do the houses communicate as differently as they look?

To begin to think about these questions, I began with the changes I was noticing in the social world of the village. The story turned on two kinds of events: on the one hand, the great events of globalization, economic structural adjustments, and social transformation. And on the other, a young Walangama entrepreneur whose pioneering activities effectively inserted the macroeconomic shifts into the local village economy.

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**Table 11.1.** Accessibility ranks of the nodes in figure 11.1 reveal two hierarchical levels.

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First, the big picture: both Walangama’s economic prosperity and its architectural transformation were closely linked to changes in their traditional caste occupation, pottery making, abetted—perhaps surprisingly—by economic liberalization (Winslow 1996). After the watershed elections of 1977, Sri Lanka opened its markets, let its currency float, and invested in industrial infrastructure to attract foreign businesses to new Free Trade Zones. The government also undertook two major public investment initiatives: the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Program and a Public Sector Housing Program. The Mahaweli Project comprised a series of hydroelectric dams built to provide electricity for industry and irrigation for Dry Zone farming (Karunatilake 1988). The housing initiatives began with the Hundred Thousand Houses Program (1978–1983), which granted new houses primarily to the urban poor. It was followed by the Million Houses Program (1984–1988), which was targeted more on rural communities (Yap 1994: ch. II). Together, these two programs absorbed nearly half of all public investment in the 1979–1985 period (Athukorala and Jayasuriya 1994:79).

In Walangama, a completely unpredictable but highly productive local-level synergy developed between these two initiatives. It came about because of the far-reaching vision of a young Walangama man called Sumana Mudalali (Sumana—the-Trader). The son of a village coconut trader, Sumana Mudalali had gotten to know the Mahaweli area while making his rounds to supply traditional Walangama pottery to shops and markets. In the early 1980s, he was there just as the effects of increased irrigation were beginning to be felt not only in agriculture but also in dairy farming. Milk is marketed to Sri Lankans primarily as milk powder and as cow’s milk yogurt and buffalo milk curd, much of which is sold in disposable clay pots. Crudely made from inferior clay and used only once, these pots were not part of Walangama’s traditional repertoire. But when Sumana Mudalali saw the truckloads of curd pots arriving from Matara on Sri Lanka’s south coast, he realized that Walangama’s much greater proximity would give it a competitive advantage. Sumana Mudalali secured a contract with a dairy farm and then returned to Walangama to acquire the pots he had promised to deliver. But to do so, he first had to recruit potters to make them.

One of Sumana Mudalali’s most effective tools for convincing potters to risk the new enterprise proved to be the government’s housing construction program. The Million Houses Program did not dole out houses directly but instead used the rural banking system to make available very low-interest loans to income-qualified households. These relatively small loans were to be used for house renovation or new construction with the expectation that the
receiving households would fill in the gaps with their own labor, materials, and funds (Yap 1994:ch. II). Although it appears that the majority of Walangama households exceeded the income ceiling, they managed to obtain loans nonetheless. The loans ranged from Rs.1,500 to Rs.7,500, comparable to just a few months of potter household income. But Walangama families reported spending far more, as much as Rs.100,000. They made up the difference with bank loans, savings, and, especially, by taking advances against future pottery production first from Sumana Mudalali and then from other village men who joined him in the booming business of buying and selling pots for Dry Zone dairy farms (Winslow 1996:719). By 1992, this little village of 200 or so households was turning out around 100,000 handmade curd pots a month; by the mid-2000s, with the help of local technological innovations, production was ten times that. Consequently, Walangama incomes have been more than able to compensate for the spiraling inflation and declining government services so typical of economic liberalization, wherever it occurs (Winslow 2003, 2009).

Sumana Mudalali was able to call on real and classificatory kin to begin and later to sustain his new business. Almost all Sri Lankans use a Dravidian kin-term and marriage system, which encodes a preference for cross-cousin marriage. Walangama residents address each other with kin terms almost exclusively and frequently refer to their community as “one family,” despite an economy firmly grounded in a household-based mode of production. But the potters also were motivated by the fact that Sumana Mudalali offered them advances both in cash and in bags of cement, loads of lumber, and other scarce building materials. In a 1992 interview, Sumana Mudalali laughingly described the heaps of construction materials that took over his house and yard in those early years. His potter kin repaid him with a steady supply of curd pots to fill ever-larger contracts. Other men (and one or two women) soon followed Sumana Mudalali’s entrepreneurial lead and curd pot production and new houses spread in tandem throughout Walangama.

**TAKING BLANTON TO SRI LANKA: THE FLEXIBLE AND INCLUSIVE PIL GÊ**

In order to understand how the new houses might have shaped as well as been shaped by a changed village life, we first need to consider the houses they replaced (figure 11.2). I present below (figure 11.2a) the floor plan and Blanton graph of an old Walangama house. It was built around 1940, although the kitchen, with its woven palm frond walls, would have been replaced many times over the years and latrines appeared in the village only in the 1960s. The
house is a traditional pil gē, a raised mudbrick structure with plastered walls and palm-thatched roof, about 750 square feet (70 m²) in area. The wide front veranda (istōpu), facing the midula (swept front yard) and open to passersby, is typical of this type of house.

The istōpu serves as an outside foyer, a transitional space between public and private that both invites and channels visitors. Passersby first step off the public path, walk across the midula and then, with permission, take a seat on a mat or chair on the istōpu to talk, rest, escape the sun, and chew a little areca nut and betel leaf. Typically, the istōpu is a primarily male space. Unless they are strangers or past the age at which they might lend a hand with domestic chores, village women are more likely to go around the side of the house to sit near more-private domestic areas at the rear than in the public space at the front. Interestingly, the istōpu also has a little isolated room, separate from the main rooms of the house. This room was used for storing rice, giving birth, and for housing overnight guests who were not well enough known to be allowed

**Figure 11.2a. Walangama pil gē.** Built around 1940, this is the oldest extant house in Walangama. Due to a property line dispute between brothers, it is soon to be taken down. Note the swept front yard (midula), the veranda (istōpu), and the veranda room (istōpu câmara). (Photo: 2013, Deborah Winslow.)
into the intimacy of the house’s interior. It was also sometimes used to isolate girls experiencing the highly polluting status of first menstruation (Winslow 1980:608). Finally, the *istōpu* was where particularly important guests, such as Buddhist monks or marriage negotiation delegates, were greeted formally with bows, foot washing, and betel leaves before being led inside.

Passing through the front door, a visitor enters the *sālle*. Until the advent of television in the 1990s, the *sālle* was not a space where residents of the house sat around casually; it was a reception and sitting room for guests. Within it, but as far from the front door as possible, there was an area set aside for eating at a table, although women and small children more commonly took their meals seated on low stools in the kitchen. Today the *sālle* functions both as a reception area and as a family room.

From the *sālle*, one can access the bedroom and the house’s rear exit, which leads to an outdoor space that does not have the public formality of the *midula*. The area right around the back door is used to store water and cooking pots, farming implements, and other household necessities. A few steps further and one finds the kitchen, a simple structure constructed of woven palm fronds whose airy weave allows hearth smoke to escape. Beyond the kitchen, a tiny brick structure houses a water-seal latrine. If you explore a Walangama compound a bit further, you may find a small household vegetable garden, a roofed platform that serves as a pottery workshop, and a shallow pit kiln for firing pots.
Following Blanton, I performed an accessibility rank analysis of this *pil gê’s* rooms: I counted the links between every pair of rooms, summed them, and then rank ordered the sums. Five hierarchical levels emerged. I had anticipated that the *istôpu*, the most public space, would have the lowest rank, but it did not. The best connected, the most central of all the spaces turned out to be the *sâlle*, from which one can most easily access all of the delineated spaces. More predictably, the highest ranked and least accessible are the latrine and the kitchen, both tucked into the privacy zone at the rear of the house. In between are the *istôpu* (Rank 2), the bedroom (Rank 3), the non-communicating room off the *istôpu* (Rank 4), and the *midula* (marked “O/F” for Outside Front, also Rank 4) (table 11.2).

Blanton alerted us to the importance of the canonical messages communicated by house architecture, the spatial delineations that express and reinforce particular, conventional categorizations, separations, and alignments. Overall, the *pil gê’s* architectural canon communicates a sense of a family that lives and works together, open to the rest of the village while clearly distinct from it, and with a minimum of internal differentiation for either work or social status.

There is first of all a clear but also graduated separation between public and private; the house welcomes and shelters even casual visitors, but only as far as the *istôpu*. From that point on, one clearly needs a more formal invitation to proceed. While the *istôpu* is always open, the door into the *sâlle* is closed and literally barred when the family retires for the night; its reopening the next morning is a public signal that the household is again ready to welcome the world. The front doors of elderly villagers are monitored by concerned neighbors who will go check for illness or even death if a door fails to open at first light. The isolation of the side room directly off the *istôpu* and outside the family threshold is thus quite marked. When the room is occupied by a child

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**Table 11.2. Accessibility ranks of an older Walangama house**
enduring her first menstruation, the symbolic separation was poignant, on the same accessibility level as the *midula* and out of the house completely.

The *pil gē* kitchen is not the center of public life as it is in many Western homes. Rather, it is hidden and protected, the least accessible space in the house except for the latrine. Similarly, the dining area is shielded from casual gaze in keeping with the fact that food and its effects are a focus of generalized concern. Villagers dislike being watched while eating; some believe that an envious gaze might attract the attention of demonic forces and illness. More positively, the kitchen is said to be the realm of a goddess, Shriakantha, who comes at night to check it for cleanliness and to eat the bit of rice left at the bottom of the cooking pot just for her.

A *pil gē*’s canon reveals little concern with individuating differentiations. The architecture of the house allows for but does not insist upon separation by either gender or age. The kitchen is a place of women’s work but it is not forbidden to men. Men may tend to occupy the public space of the *istōpu* and women the private space of the kitchen, but the separation is far from rigid. Women are frequently found chatting and playing with children at the front of the house while men sit on mats behind, weaving palm frond branches, repairing tools, or simply enjoying a cup of tea in the kitchen.

Other sorts of separations, too, are muted. Over the years, this particular house was lived in by at least five people and sometimes several more, yet there is only a single bedroom. Furthermore, with two doors, one into the *sālle* and the other directly outside, the bedroom is midway in the accessibility rank and not particularly private. It could be claimed for privacy when needed, perhaps because of illness or to accommodate a newly married couple. But Walangama people almost never sleep alone; beds are occupied at night by several women and young children while men and older children sleep on floor mats in whatever space is convenient.

Thus the *pil gē* communicates a message of flexibility and togetherness rather than separation and rupture. There is a concern for privatizing food preparation and consumption without isolating it all together. Only the deep impurities of first menstruation and toilets are true zones of separation. Is the same true of the new houses? To answer this question we turn now to another floor plan and Blanton graph.

**CALIFORNIA STYLE IN WALANGAMA**

Walangama households undertook their house-building projects in stages. Bags of cement and piles of lumber and hardware were purchased piecemeal
as funds became available and traders gave advances. A brick foundation might grace a yard for months or even years before the house itself went up. But over a little more than a decade, bright plastered brick walls, red-tile roofs, and cement floors replaced most of the wattle-and-daub or mud-brick-and-plaster, thatched-roof, and clay-floored structures of earlier times.

Walangama villagers generally favored what some called the “California” plan (figure 11.3a), easily distinguishable by a cement-floored carport-like space sheltering the area around the front door. The carport replaces the istōpu; houses have one or the other, never both. But despite its appearance and the fact that it is at ground level, rather than raised like the traditional istōpu, the carport normally functions as a space for people, not vehicles. Visitors again cross the midula but now linger in the carport where, sheltered by the tile roof overhead, they sit on chairs or mats, or perch on the low cement foundation
curb that projects into the carport from under the house’s front wall. Figure 11.3b displays the floor plan and Blanton graph for a California-style house.

From this floor plan we can see that once the visitor passes the novel carport, he or she is in familiar territory. The first room encountered is again the sālle; there are bedrooms off the sālle; there is an area reserved for eating at a table that is only slightly more set apart and is again adjoining the back door; and outside the back door are separate structures first for a kitchen and further back for a latrine. By the turn of the century, a few houses had permanent attached kitchens with a raised platform for fire-fueled cooking. They were furnished much like the separate kitchen sheds with floor racks, pots, and spoons hung from the rafters, and mats and low stools on the floor where women work. Even in 2008, while many people told me that they planned eventually to build an attached kitchen, the separate thatched kitchen remained the village norm.

An observant visitor might have noticed that the carport-istōpu does not contain the isolation room of the pil gē’s istōpu. Instead, my own experience is that the small bedroom at the very back of the house (Room 6 in figure 11.3b), which is not reachable directly from the sālle, functions in a similar way: it is used for storage, for the sick, and to isolate a newly mature girl (these days, women have their babies in the hospital). Of course, these practices are not discernible from the floor plan alone but depend on the familiarity gained through ethnographic research. However, the floor plan does direct us to the
fact that the third bedroom is different than the other two. Once we know that this is the new isolation room, the floor plan also highlights the fact that degree of isolation has been significantly lessened. The polluting girl is no longer kept outside the threshold but remains within the family fold. Interestingly, it is said that there once was a time when girls experiencing their first menstruation would be housed away from the house altogether in a temporary shed built in the back yard; the shed would be burned when the isolation period was over. In this light, the istōpu room of the pil gê might be seen as an interim step, integrating the girl more with her family during this difficult time. The back room in the California-style house then becomes a further move in the destigmatization of first menstruation, a point that Blanton’s spatial analytics helps us to see.

In addition to the back room, the new house has two other bedrooms, allowing potentially for further spatial individualization. However, ethnographic observation reveals rooms and beds are not assigned but continue to be shared. What the additional room seems to provide is the possibility of a space apart. For example, I saw one such room temporarily furnished with a small table, desk lamp, and chair to provide a separate workspace for a child studying for an important exam.

Having more rooms, this house also has more hierarchical levels (table 11.3), seven rather than the five of the old house.

But if we look carefully we can see that the fact of more hierarchical levels suggests a difference that is perhaps more apparent than real. The underlying template, made perfectly clear to us through Blanton’s method, is remarkably similar.

- The sâlle (reception room) is the best-connected space in both houses.
- The dining area is linked directly to the back door in each house, and while it is set apart more in the California house, the separation is not reinforced with a door.
- The istōpu or its equivalent, the carport, is next in accessibility
- Next in both houses are bedrooms reachable by one link from the sâlle.
- Then come spaces that are two links from the sâlle: the isolation room (4) and the midula (O/F) in the old house and the back room (6) and the midula (O/F) in the new house.
- Finally, the most isolated rooms in both houses are the kitchen and the latrine.

In sum, then, what Blanton’s analysis accomplishes first is to show us objectively that despite the distracting California carport, the fired-brick walls, and
the red-clay tiled roof, socially significant canonical differences between the old houses and the new are few. Both houses communicate flexibility and togetherness rather than separation and rupture, a concern for privatizing food preparation and consumption, and for keeping latrines hidden. Spatially, the most important difference is the relocation of the isolation room from outside to inside.

This answers the first of my questions: “Does this changed architecture mean also changed socio-architectural effects?” From the perspective of the inside of the house, the answer is no, the kinds of changes that Walangama residents have introduced may make their houses sturdier and give them a changed appearance, but canonically, they have little effect.

But what of the second question: “Do the houses communicate as differently as they look?” To find out, we must consider indexical as well as canonical communication: the meaning of houses from the outside.

**WHAT DO THE NEW HOUSES MEAN?**

Externally, Walangama’s new houses seem remarkably similar. Most are built to the California plan. A few have a frieze of ducks built into the carport trim and some are color washed in pastels rather than brilliant white, but the differences are slight. So much so that the most obvious indexical message appears to be singularly simple. There either is a new, modern house, or there is not; it is a dichotomous variable. A new house tells observers that those who live inside are economically stable enough to find the means to complete such a major project. In a community that prizes economic self-sufficiency and the

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ability to rise economically (*diyunuwa*), this is not an unimportant message. But Blanton’s cross-cultural analysis take us further and permits us to consider why housing is not used more distinctively in Walangama.

One of Blanton’s findings was a negative correlation between external housing decoration and a combination variable that he called community integration (Blanton 1994:133–134). In places with higher levels of interhousehold ties and exchanges, where people used a communal cemetery, and where there were communal rituals—the three factors comprising his integration measure—houses were less likely to be decorated expensively and in ways that tried to distinguish one sharply from another. Blanton actually hedged this conclusion, citing limitations of his nonrandom sample. But Walangama bears out these observations: it is a single-caste community with strong interhousehold ties of kinship and marriage; they do indeed use a communal burial ground; and there are significant communal rituals. While household economic autonomy is important there also are strong ethics of communal care and responsibility (Winslow 2009).

Again drawing on his cross-cultural data, Blanton argued that when elaborate external decoration of houses did occur it constituted a kind of information broadcasting in the context of either internal or external social differentiation. Internally, the message was generally one of social boundedness, such as when elites seek to distinguish themselves from commoners. Externally, elaborate house decoration appeared to be an effort to show off wealth and thus exhibit that the residents of the house were worthy of economic and other alliances (Blanton 1994:188–189). After a multiple regression analysis, Blanton concluded that “external decoration of houses is a complex variable that is related both to indexical communication, by way of status anxiety, and to a lesser extent, to social boundedness” (ibid.:147). Again, Walangama fits these cross-culturally derived observations. There is little internal stratification, economic ties with the outside are determined chiefly by caste-based occupation, and those ties are mediated more by trader middlemen than they are by individual households. The persistent simplicity and uniformity of Walangama housing is consistent with Blanton’s cross-cultural results and tells us that despite the increase in prosperity, the community has not experienced an increase in internal socioeconomic differentiation (Winslow 2009).

Interestingly, the one apparent departure from Blanton’s predictions actually serves to confirm the larger point: the sensitivity of the indexical dimension to social reality. Pottery making is a messy occupation and Walangama yards are workspaces, crowded with drying pots, pit kilns, and shelters for potter’s wheels. Potters do not leave the house each day for work in a distant
field or town. They work at home, moving between work, childcare, and meals, from wheel to kitchen to kiln to *istōpu*; inevitably some of the water, clay, and ash of their occupation moves with them. Therefore, while Walangama houses are as new and costly as many in neighboring non-potter villages, they do not display pristine paint and tidy yards adorned with decorative plants. I have visited former Walangama residents after they have relocated to new housing colonies. Their houses always stand out as busy sites of industrious labor in contrast to the tidy and quiet domesticity of their new neighbors who leave home each day to work elsewhere.

Overall, the Blanton graphs provided a new understanding of the fluid and integrated nature of Walangama’s instantiation of the Dravidian family system. Without them, mere cosmetic differences might have distracted us from important similarities between the old and new houses. On a finer scale, they illuminated subtle changes, such as the shift in the isolation room and the increase in the number of bedrooms. The methods of *Houses and Household* revealed shades of meaning in the phenomenology of Walangama social life that would otherwise remain unnoticed. Blanton himself, speaking, I think, to archaeologists, concluded that “there has been inadequate attention paid to comparative research that would allow us to . . . systematically evaluate our various theoretical frameworks in the broadest possible sense” (Blanton 1994:185). What taking Blanton to Sri Lanka showed me is that it is very much a two-way street: local data and generalizing theory are mutually informing. Without paying attention to particular trees, we would never understand where the forests came from.

“We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us,” Churchill cautioned his wartime audience as they debated the rebuilding of the House of Commons. However, Walangama’s architectural tale, illuminated by Blanton’s methods and theory, tells us that the relationship between houses and households is not so cut-and-dried. It is instead an ongoing process of mutual shaping and being shaped best understood by combining the twin lenses of generalizing theory and local-level ethnography.

POSTSCRIPT: ETHNOGRAPHY NEVER STANDS STILL

In 2013, after completing this essay, I was again in Walangama. There I found two new architectural developments. Happily, the first confirms the analysis above. California-style carports are being replaced with *istōpus*, bringing form into consonance with ethnographically observed usage. In contrast, the second change may disrupt rather than endorse longstanding social norms. Outwardly, it is but a small deviation: a few families have begun construction
Still, with Blanton’s work in mind, one wonders. Does this increase in hierarchical levels matter? Does it perhaps signal a decrease in community integration, even the beginning of a major community transformation? None of the multistory houses had been completed, so I could not yet know if, as was true in the past, cultural practice would mitigate material constraint. But if Blanton has taught us anything, it is that if we want to understand the shaping of society, it behooves us to pay attention to the shaping of buildings.

NOTE

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