

World Archaeological Congress 4

University of Cape Town

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Symposium: House and Home. An introduction to the everyday life of historic objects in domestic space

Abstract Package

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Description of session

Few excavated archaeological contexts reveal objects *in situ*, in the very place they were in use inside the home. It is rare to be able to say that a particular collection of historic artefacts was assembled in a certain suite of rooms unless some catastrophic event has engulfed the inhabitants or the site has been abandoned suddenly. This problem is particularly acute for the later periods when the activities which took place on the upper floors of buildings can rarely be commented upon by excavators. In most cases, particularly for urban sites, the best that can be hoped for is a convincing spatial association between a particular tenement with a documented history of occupancy and an excavated assemblage, though even here the excavator must reluctantly admit that many artefacts, even the broken ones, have been removed and re-cycled.

Archaeologists of the historic periods are fortunate in being able to look elsewhere for their clues and paintings and documents provide some useful pointers. Written sources such as probate inventories, for example, provide unrivalled detail for the use of household artefacts in the domestic environment, particularly for the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and North America. Theoretical stances too have an important bearing on the way a particular study might unfold. While traditional studies often include long and valuable catalogues of artefacts they tend to treat artefacts classes as isolated bodies of evidence quite removed from their social and cultural context. Processual approaches, on the other hand, while they brought a heightened awareness of quantification and methodologies, rarely considered household artefacts in their setting.

Much of the most profitable work in this field has been inspired by later post-processual theories, in particular structuralism, neo-Marxism and phenomenology and it is hoped that this symposium will draw upon this recent work. Particular attention will be paid to the interpretation of artefacts common on archaeological sites, such as pottery. Key questions to be addressed include: the relationship between status, ethnicity, gender and artefacts; the role of exotic and imported goods; the changing meaning of goods between their site of production, purchase and consumption; practices of home decoration; the positioning of items within houses; the extent to

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which consumption is intended to shape self-image rather than create an impression for others and; the interpretative challenges of the documentary, pictorial and archaeological record.

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House and Home. An introduction to the everyday life of historic objects in domestic space

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The aim of this paper is to introduce some of the themes touched upon by contributors to this symposium. A brief review of the limitations of traditional and processual approaches to the study of items in the historic home is followed by a discussion of post-processual contributions. Three perspectives are emphasised as having particular value, namely structuralist, neo-Marxist and phenomenological approaches. Themes such as consumption, gender, ethnicity and their impact on assemblages are all briefly considered using a wide range of case studies from North America and Europe.

Imported Mediterranean ceramics in English households

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Medieval and early post-medieval pottery from Italy, Portugal, southern France and Spain is routinely recovered from archaeological contexts in southern England where it is mostly used by archaeologists as a tool for dating and evidence for trade. This paper considers the value of imported pottery for other purposes such as investigating patterns of consumption and changing fashions, examining the relationship between gender, ethnicity, pottery and the household, and exploring the meaning of colours and decoration.

Building identity: gabled architecture and the rise of the Cape gentry, in context.

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The first three decades of the nineteenth century was a time of great transformation in the social, political and cultural landscapes of the Cape Colony, South Africa. The political and bureaucratic impact of the new British administration was just beginning to be felt and a new class – the slave-owning Cape gentry- was emerging. These new identities were being signaled in various ways, including architecturally. One example of this is the emergence of gabled architecture in the Cape rural farmsteads at this time. Gabled architecture in the Cape is linked to identity formation and expression and can be seen as an outgrowth of the aspirations of the people who built it. This

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paper seeks to place one such farmstead – Klaarefontein – within the social, cultural and political context of the nineteenth century rural Cape with specific reference to how one family used architecture to signal their membership of the Cape gentry. The importance of taking both the agency of the people who create the archaeological record and the ways in which they perceived their landscape, into account is emphasised.

Foiling the 19th Century: Making sense of Johannesburg's historical archaeology.

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The extensive European colonisation of the South African interior has a chronological reach of little more than 150 years and a substantial numeric weight of barely a century. Land north of the Vaal River, today the economic powerhouse of sub-saharan Africa, did not attract the attention of European settlers in great numbers until the discovery, in 1886, of vast, uniformly banked gold deposits. As prospecting fever swept the highveld, Black farmers and Trekkers, who only decades before had sought to escape direct British control, were faced with an unprecedented tide as thousands of 'Uitlanders' streamed inland. Burgeoning Johannesburg was distinctively global: a character echoed in the new market places of mass production and consumption. Implicitly, attempts to reach an archaeological understanding of this urbanisation process are fraught with the recognised hurdles of late 19th & early 20th century material culture sequences. Excavations at a number of Johannesburg sites, ranging from large urban dumps to military, industrial and black labourer settlements, yield artefact assemblages of striking generic similarity. Arguably, attempts to reclaim the diversity of these early polyglot communities will turn on a deep, comparative attention to an increasingly diverse and integrated range of material culture. Setting landscapes, photographs and oral histories against documentation and physical residues permits a first step on the way to Johannesburg's historical archaeology.