

Interview with Victor Buchli

Douglass W. BAILEY*

Victor Buchli is Reader in Material Culture within the Material Culture Group at University College London in the UK. He has a BA in Architecture from the University of California at Berkeley and a PhD in Archaeology from Cambridge University. Victor works on architecture, domesticity, the archaeology of the recent past, critical understandings of materiality and new technologies, and the anthropology of sustainability and design. He has conducted fieldwork in Russia, Britain and more recently in Kazakhstan, where he concluded research based on neighborhood ethnography in the new capitol of Astana. In that work he examined questions of materiality, architecture and urbanism in the post-socialist period.

Currently, Victor is writing a book entitled *Immateriality* which examines the significance of material cultures that paradoxically attempt to deny their own physicality. Also he is writing *The Anthropology of Architecture* which will be published by Berg in 2011. He has begun work as a member of the interdisciplinary Templeton Scholars Group on the origins of domesticity at the Neolithic site of *Çatalhöyük* in Turkey where he is examining long-term culture change and processes of material iteration and innovation.

Victor's previous books include *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Berg 1999) - an ethno-historical study of a constructivist housing block in Moscow, *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (Routledge 2001) with Gavin Lucas an examination of the critical issues which arise when the archaeological method is applied to the study of contemporary material culture, and *Interpreting Archaeology* (Routledge 1995) co-edited with Ian Hodder. He has also edited *The Material Culture Reader* (Berg 2002), the five volume *Material Culture: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences* (Routledge 2004), and with C. Alexander and C. Humphrey *Urban life in Post Soviet Asia* (Routledge 2007).

Douglass Bailey: You have written a lot about something called the "archaeology of the contemporary past" in which archaeologists apply their methods to very recent time periods and even to modern, contemporary events and contexts. Can archaeologists study all periods, right up to the present, or is there a limit in time after which one can no longer be an archaeologist?

Victor Buchli: The short answer is no. There is no limit. Archaeology in and of itself is always a contemporary practice. No matter whether it is focused on the past or on something that takes place in the present within a particular social field or political context. There is no avoidance of the fact that archaeology is a contemporary concern. This is what Michael Shanks has written about for a long time.

DWB: How would you do an archaeology of today?

VB: Archaeology has always been a method that has focused on the past, however you define that, for example as defined as heritage. A lot of things hinge upon the particular, arbitrary definition of a term like heritage and how heritage has been tied to projects of nation-building. One of the interesting things about the archaeology of the contemporary past is that it has moved past the arbitrary definition that has had a specific purpose in terms of creating a chronological endpoint. For example, in the UK there is a shared understanding that there are monuments that date after a particularly designated chronological time and that these monuments do not fall under the official criteria of the listing (and protection) of heritage monuments. An example would be the housing projects of the 1960s in Britain or a shopping mall. It is important to break out of this traditional heritage framework (in which archaeology typically engages). A lot of interesting things begin to happen, especially when you start to apply an archaeological method within this recent timeframe.

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