The co-evolution of prehistoric architecture and human interaction

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When people talk to each other, they usually do so in places that have been shaped by human hands.

We walk toward each other on the paved ground. We meet in rooms whose walls draw a boundary between the 'here and now' and an 'elsewhere' (the original act of architecture, according to Cache 1995). We sit down on furniture, the arrangement of which pre-organizes how we face each other.

Thus, human-built environments suggest specific forms of co-presence (Hausendorf/Schmitt 2016). But at the same time, they represent material sediment of preferred configurations of human interaction.

When and how did the history of the mutual shaping of structures of architecture and interaction begin? And given both the spatio-physical features of everyday interaction (Goffman 1963, Kendon 1976) and the history of creating therefore suited (and suitable) architectures in prehistory, what can we learn about space, communication, and in particular, the evolution of language?

In my talk, I aim to explore these questions by firstly illustrating how closely language, space, and configurations of co-presence are intertwined in everyday human life. For this, I contrast short video sequences of encounters at the weekly market and in public places with video sequences of interactions among non-human primates.

Further inquiring into the origins of the connection between built environments and interaction, I then engage with architectural milestones and practices of dwelling, building, and interacting in human evolution (Hochuli/Streeck 2022). I will raise the question as to what extent prehistoric architectures (huts, caves, fireplaces) and stone tools (handaxes) can be regarded (and, from an interactional linguistic point of view, be analyzed) as material sedimentations of human/hominid forms of co-presence and respective configurations of interaction.

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