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The forked centre: duality and privacy in Polynesian spaces and architecture

This paper will focus on a spatial duality paradigm that exists at the heart of Polynesian spaces where the notion of private and public is opposite to the Western concept of space. The centre as a limit in Polynesian thinking is the point of extreme transparency where the private individual becomes obliterated. It is the domain where what is termed in Samoa the vā resides. So what is central to any sense of space in Polynesia is the vā or the in-between space, a relational opening up inhabited by deities/community/land/family. According to Alfred Gell, this relational space in tattooing exists in the folding and doubling of skin on the tattooed body, collapsing the distinctions between an inside and an outside, marking an ambivalent limit.

The paper explores this ambivalent limit in the maga or forked configuration of the main central post of the Samoan Faletele or Guesthouse. The maga doubles and complicates a simplistic reading of the centre as the domain of privacy and stability. This motif in Samoan architecture reinforces on one hand the centre as a limit that is marked in space – a location where focus is amplified; on the other hand, it marks a region of the unlimited, a focus charged with ambiguity and duality - a place inhabited by the vā or sacred in-between space that allows entities/time/space to collapse together in an interconnectedness. The centre in Polynesia architecture becomes only an act that assists in the opening up of/to the vā space.