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Constructing Privacy: Spatial Structure and Social Status in Amarna’s Central City

By James Martin

A Brief History of the Central City at Amarna

When considering Egypt’s eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1550-1229 B.C.E.) and perhaps all of Egypt’s history, the most well-known and mainstream of the ancient pharaohs is King Tutankhamun. Known for his lavish tomb and the near-perfect condition of his resting place, another notable feature of his life should be his family history. Tutankhamun was likely the son of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, two powerhouse visionaries that attempted to change the course of Egyptian livelihood and tradition.¹ In the eighteenth Dynasty, Egypt was at its most powerful and was the leading empire of the ancient world, and Akhenaten was next in line for the throne.² Akhenaten changed the religious and political landscape of Egypt by idolizing one god, the Aten. This sun-disk god was not new to Egyptian cosmology and was even worshipped by Akhenaten’s father, Amenhotep III, and had been given a greater status in Egyptian funerary temples than ever before.³

³ Ibid, 171-172.
King Akhenaten’s Central City⁴ functioned as a bustling center of a newfound capital that housed the Royal Family, supported a staffing of servants, and, above all, praised his god, the Aten.⁵ The Aten is referred to here as Akhenaten’s god because of the emphasis he placed on the importance of the Aten as well as centered Egyptian religion around this one deity. The Central City, however, was not called “home” by everyday citizens; remnants remain of living accommodations for royalty, police, military, and servants. The city of Amarna was a dream come true for Akhenaten, and the Central City served to represent the new capital of Egypt as a center for the composition of religion and state. In analyzing the archaeological publications on Amarna, spatial structure of the King’s House, and living quarters of different servicemen, “privacy” develops as an attribute accessed exclusively by the royals. Privacy, in this paper, will refer directly to the spaces accessible to people of different social classes. Mainly, this paper will compare the amount of space allocated in housing for the royals, servants, and various servicemen to understand how they accessed their personal lives.

Akhenaten moved to establish his royal city after he assumed the position of King, with the death of the heir, Thutmose, and changed his name from Amenhotep IV to Akhenaten.⁶ Akhenaten made failed attempts to remodel areas, like Thebes,⁷ to adhere to his repudiation of traditional Egyptian polytheism, which transformed into a monotheistic-like belief in the Aten after his ascension to King. There was a need for a virgin land, one to start fresh for his creation of a land of worship – this constituency was outlined by several “boundary stelae” that described what Akhenaten set out to do at Amarna. The boundary stelae of Amarna were carved into cliffs and set up the official parameters

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⁴ “Central City” and “Amarna” refer to the same location. “Central City” will be used to refer to the administrative and religious hub of Amarna.
⁵ Kemp, The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, 27.
⁶ Ibid., 14.
of the city. The stelae covered several of Akhenaten’s plans – including his desire to construct a “House of the Aten,” “Mansion of the Aten,” apartments for himself and his wife, and a “House of rejoicing” for the Aten, who he refers to as “my father.”

The Central City was able to bring this vision to life; it served to house the Royal Family and serve its rightful administrative and religious purposes as the new capital of Egypt. Indeed, the promises were kept, and the buildings erected in the Central City served as the House and Mansion of the Aten – the Great Aten Temple and the Small Aten Temple, respectively. The “apartments” of Pharaoh and Chief Wife sat directly across from the Great Palace, in the King’s House, connected by a bridge that ran over the main road of the city; symbolically connecting the private life of the King to his administrative duties. Amarna’s design is heavily centered around the importance of the family and their ties with the Aten, but also allowed space for the Royal Family to interact with their constituents, ceremoniously.

The very creation of Akhetaten can be well argued to have been designed around the needs of a king and the god he chose to center Egypt’s life around. Steven Snape describes Amarna as “a city whose main inhabitants would be the Aten, the royal family, the court and a population that serviced the elite residents.” In stating this, Snape establishes the idea of Amarna being erected as a city for the royals, and through Akhenaten’s own discourse, to equally suit the divine. This divinity is illustrated through Akhenaten portraying his wife and daughters in priestly roles. Yet, he also humbles them to civilian roles as well,

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8 Snape, 157.
9 Ibid., 158.
10 “Akhetaten” is another name for Amarna. It can also be referred to as El-Amarna.
11 Snape, 156.
12 Michael Mallinson, Pharaohs of the Sun: Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and Tutankhamen (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), 75.
portraying their daily lives, which are shown through the family giving a food offering to the Aten, which will be significant in how Akhenaten and his family interact with the public. (Fig. 1). The establishment of Amarna creates an environment that revolves around the lives of the Royal Family, which is strongly present in the placement of servant’s quarters, as they seem to be an afterthought in the construction of the city.

**Defining Status through Archaeology**

Certain items that resided in the King’s House serve to represent status and reinforce the social hierarchy of Amarna. P.T. Crocker identifies bathrooms and latrines as symbols of status, whereas Pendlebury describes small “closets” in the King’s House, with stone basins and bath slabs, presumably where a latrine resided.\(^{13}\) Also present in the Royal Estate was a well, which Crocker lists as “status-enhancing”\(^{14}\) for being able to provide water to the family – a basic necessity for life that they had at their immediate disposal. The group of rooms is suggested to have formed a type of master bedroom to the King – holding the bedroom, bathroom, and latrine,\(^ {15}\) while servant’s quarters held nowhere near this amount of

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\(^{15}\) Pendlebury, 88.
inner rooms within their homes. Personal life was more easily accessible to the Royals, in ways that seem basic and natural, especially when considering that the Royals had ready access to a toilet and water. Even this baseline level of privacy, to be able to get one’s own water, reinforces a social divide between Akhenaten and his people.

The Royal House boasts several possible bedrooms that allocated individual sleeping spaces for the King and the Princesses, where servants were not given nearly as many options for daily rest. Barry Kemp includes a depiction of the bedroom of Akhenaten, featuring the bed, mattress, and headrest that the King would have used; however, this does not insist that Akhenaten slept in this specific room on a nightly basis. By interpreting the depiction of the bedroom and assuming it is not where the King slept ritually, it becomes easier to understand the availability of options that existed for the royals, where the King could have slept in more than one place, if he chose to. The lack of choice in the lives of servants demonstrates a lack of privacy because a servant had no choice but to comply with their living arrangements.

As previously mentioned, the way the King and his family were depicted, humbly honoring the Aten, would be illustrative of how openly they interacted with the people of Amarna. The Window of Appearance likely existed in the King’s House and was a ceremonial place for the king to present gifts in the role of

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16 Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, 143.
provider for his people, further solidifying his status. Considering the Royal Family had a massive construction for their living, it is easy to assume they enjoyed the luxury of privacy. However, if the Window did, in fact, exist within the house, this implies the King was open to holding public gatherings and distribution events within his home. Being able to dictate rooms for specific purposes also serves to identify the interconnection of status and space. It is highly doubtful that servants had the ability to reserve a room for women to solely reside in; nor does it seem plausible that servants and the lower class would have been able to construct large enough courtyards to host a plethora of people for a community-sized gathering.

**Housing through an Archaeological Lens**

Privacy may have been a determinant of social status, but just because the family lived privately to the citizenry does not imply they lived privately of their religion. Through the 1920s and 30s, archaeologist J.D.S Pendlebury excavated the Central City at Amarna, recording the Royal Estate, Great Palace, and quarters of the servants, police, and military. When comparing the living spaces of housing staff with those of the princesses’ rooms, there is a noticeable difference in the amount of privacy in each section, based on room size. Understandably, the King would have sufficient personal space, but it speaks volumes that the children are given more access to space than the staff working for the family.

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17 Ibid., 41.
18 Pendlebury, viii.
The King’s House sat at the southern portion of the Royal Estate, close to servant’s quarters, magazines, an immense garden, and individual rooms for the princesses. The servant’s quarters, here, are to the west and are accessed through an entrance courtyard; however, they have restricted access to the portions that would have housed the royal family. Servants living within the Royal Estate were much more compressed and lived communal-like. It is worth noting that none of the presumed servant’s quarters are completely sealed off from the other, there seems to be connecting openings within to give access to the room immediately next to it. By sealing off access to the Royal Family and the rest of the Estate, servants were being physically segregated from the opportunity for more space. The general layout of the Estate reaffirms the idea that servant lives were not private, but these workers co-existed, while the Royal Family had options to spend their time as they pleased, individually.

Additionally, the space given to the daughters of Akhenaten and Nefertiti emphasizes the importance of familial ties within royalty. Pendlebury records the presence of wall fragments that were littered with streaks of red, yellow, blue, green, and black paint – logically implying the existence of a playroom for the princesses. The six daughters were aptly represented in the art of the Amarna period, speaking to

19 Ibid., 87.
their importance to the King and Queen. The princesses are recorded in scenes of the family dining,²⁰ relaxing,²¹ and making offerings to the Aten.²² With the endless resources available to the Royal Family, they were able to distribute access to privacy among the children so that the princesses had their spaces to convene but, at the end of the day, had individual places to call their own. Providing a playroom, individual sleeping rooms, and inscribing everlasting art adds to a belief that, though the royal family was more private in forms of living accommodations, this did not hinder their ability to act as a family unit. Keeping in mind, though, that the family is acting as “one” for their one, the Aten.

Each daughter’s name spoke to the presence of the Aten in their lives – Meketaten’s name translating to “She Whom the Aten Protects” and Ankhesenpaaten’s name translating to “May She Live for the Aten.”²³ Nefertiti’s full name translates to “Perfect One of the Aten’s Perfection, the Beautiful One is Here.”²⁴ This namesake was used even before Akhenaten changed his name. The populace was made aware of the family’s close ties to the Aten, reestablishing the family’s place on Amarna’s hierarchy. For Akhenaten to refer to the Aten as his “father”²⁵ further ties his family into the role of divinity, deifying their earthly presence even before any of them have died. This reaches back to the assertion that, even though the family had steady access to privacy, they were very connected with each other in the realm of cosmology. Privacy allowed the family to be depicted intimately within the home but kept a public image intact that asserted the family’s ties to Egypt’s main deity.

²¹ Kemp, The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, 172.
²² Ibid., 80.
²⁴ Ibid., 9.
²⁵ Snape, 155.
Greater space to live afforded the royals more opportunities, such as allocating individual rooms, but their lives were not sealed off to the people of Amarna. The Royals’ lifestyle in areas like the Great Palace (to the west, connected to the Royal Estate via bridge) contained a modicum of community, hosting visits from people coming for food, drinks, music, and self-care.\(^{26}\) The biggest factor to point at social class was the presence of armed men posing as security when the Royal Family was present.\(^ {27}\) Privacy seemed to be an extension of what one could have, because, evidently, privacy did not equate with a lonely life. The massive presence of space was enthralling, for the family seemed to have choices as to where they could host or rest for the evening. The Great Palace alone extended 580 meters, with the Royal Estate appearing to serve as a miniature version, with lengths at less than half those of the Great Palace.\(^ {28}\) Interestingly, this portrays the Royal Family in a lighter fashion, seeming as there was an accessibility to their lives and, at this new capital, ties with the public that were not cut.

\(^{26}\) Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, 142.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 144.

Decoration serves as a representation of making a space one’s own, and this mindset is also present within the sanctity of the home of King Akhenaten and his family. Within the King’s House remained a piece of fractured mud-plaster fresco that depicted the Royal Family relaxing, with two princesses seated on cushions, on the floor, with Akhenaten and Nefertiti seated above them. Above the seated princesses are three more sets of legs, belonging to three of the other princesses. Petrie recorded this in 1894, noting that this was an advanced piece of artwork, showing traces of shading and highlighting on the two smaller girls. In having a piece like this commissioned for the Royal Family, they are fully able to take advantage of their privacy by making it intimate and unique. The intimacy of the fresco represents the ability of the family to mark their space as not only an official house, but a family-oriented home. This was a more intimate portrayal of the family, perhaps an image that would not have been found in a communal space viewed often by the public. Privacy ensured the comfort of the royals, a privilege they could guarantee with a societal rank that was higher than those around them.

**Servant’s Quarters**

Two sets of servant’s quarters existed in the Central City: one to the north of the Great Palace, and the other within the Royal Estate. Comparing the two is difficult considering the northern

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30 Ibid.
quarters at the Great Palace are being engulfed by present cultivation in Egypt. Pendlebury notes the similarities in the architecture of the servant’s quarters to that of the Workmen’s Village (situated farther east of the Central City), as well as noting the presence of a gateway to a court, which had been filled with an “intrusive set of buildings similar to the last.” It is reasonable to assume that the new buildings were added as the city grew during Akhenaten’s reign, adding in extra living accommodations for the surplus of servants needed by the Royal Family. Servant living was also likely to be constructed expeditiously since the remaining placement is already within other parts of Amarna’s administrative complex. The servant’s quarters were a subdivision of the Private Quarters, which were a subdivision of the Palace. Rather than providing individual spaces, more housing was added into preexisting quarters – commenting on the aura of privilege that comes with being able to establish terms of privacy.

Additionally, servant’s quarters at the Great Palace all included staircases in their design – which could have led to a loggia on the rooftops of each house. This examination by Pendlebury works contrarily to P.T. Crocker, who makes the assertion that loggias are demonstrative of social status. Quarters in the Royal Estate can be assumed to have been for those who served the family in a more direct role. Housing for servants in the administrative center could imply these servants, living north of the Great Palace, served in an official/administrative capacity. Though subdivisions were apparent within the apartment of the King and his family, there are traces of subdivisions in the servant class as well. Subdivisions are an important representation of how space was being used and depict the divide between a need for

\[31\] Pendlebury, 34.
\[32\] Ibid., 35.
\[33\] Ibid.
\[34\] Ibid., 36.
\[35\] A loggia is an exterior hall that is open to the air on one or more sides. The staircases found in these houses all likely led to a loggia.
\[36\] Crocker, 53.
space and a want for space. The Royal Family used their subdivisions to construct playrooms and dining rooms, while servants used their subdivisions to house more laborers. Among the servant’s quarters is a larger house that could have served as a place for the overseer of the servants.\(^37\) An overseer would have, presumably, been given more responsibilities than an average servant, so with the title of “overseer” comes a slight boost in social status. The larger house belonged to the one with the administrative role, reasserting the idea that with status came space. Evidently, with any increase in social standing came an increase in the space that one was allotted to live. These eighteenth Dynasty views of the intersections of space and hierarchy make important implications of the privileges that came with being part of the ancient upper class which included greater access to larger living accommodations.

**Comparing Servicemen to Servants**

Military and police would have resided to the east of the settlement of the Central City, with the police barracks being placed in an ideal location to monitor for suspicious or illegal activities.\(^38\) Servicemen in Amarna include the men that worked as military or police officers, while servants are those that worked for the house and resided in the Servant’s Quarters. Aforementioned with Crocker’s list of status symbols, he included a porch as a “presence attribute” – in Pendlebury’s excavation, he makes record of military quarters being built with an open court that includes a veranda.\(^39\) This reinforces the idea that the military had been held in a somewhat respectable regard. However, Crocker also mentions the presence of loggias as status symbols, but this poses an issue when every servant’s house had a staircase leading to a roof that showed presence of a loggia. Perhaps not all things were those of exclusivity, rather they were just a good idea that served a purpose.

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\(^{37}\) Pendlebury, 35.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 132.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 131.
where they were placed. It remains logical, however, that the military and police would be thought of in a higher regard than servants.

Size and proportion proved important to Akhenaten when constructing his city. Uniquely, Akhenaten was able to promote his divinity through not just the spatial structure of his own home and palaces, but through the layout of the city as a whole. Akhenaten developed the talatat, which ensured that buildings were being built to “royal scale and proportions.”40 The talatat was a block that became the standard size in Amarna, to help expedite building projects by having a precedent.41 Mallinson describes the Aten as animating all living things and with Akhenaten including daily life situations in Amarna’s art, this served as a way to connect different levels of society with the Aten.42 This can be viewed through Figure 4, showing an aspect of community even in the most prestigious of buildings in Amarna. At the behest of the King, this new royal scale intentionally created differences in the way royals and non-royals lived and how they were able to allocate their respective spaces. While the King could host the community at his leisure, average Amarnians could barely host their own families.

**Interpretations: Akhenaten as a Man of State and House**

Interpreting living accommodations for the lower-class as an afterthought speaks to the façade of portraying oneself as a form of divinity and ruler of the two lands of Egypt. Akhenaten did not destroy most temples for the previous religions when he moved the capital to Amarna; rather, they were just subject to redecorations.43 In doing so, Akhenaten presents himself as a man of reason, though he is introducing an idea that seemed drastic and, perhaps,

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, 27.
unreasonable. This presentation of reasonability comes off as a falsehood when considering that there was insufficient space for those making his dream into a reality. Though suburbs were established to house the “average” people of Amarna, it is unreasonable not to allocate housing for many of the workers the Central City had employed.

To Akhenaten’s benefit, it seems that having a lifestyle based so heavily around spatial representation allowed him to serve a role as an exceptional husband and father. Refocusing back to the King’s House, there was evidence found that hinted at the existence of a playroom and, as already discussed, the presence of rooms for each product of his procreation. This trait seemed to serve even as a precursor to the settlement of Akhenaten’s virgin land, adding to the level of respect he held regarding the Chief Wife. Nefertiti has been seen to be the main force in some Aten-centered inscriptions found at Karnak, Akhenaten’s first trial run at establishing his dream city.

Conclusion

Layout in Akhenaten’s city further developed the importance of his family, as there are remains of temples serving as sunshades for Nefertiti and his daughters. As if individual rooms, playrooms, and nurseries were not enough, Akhenaten was dedicating grand temples to his loved ones – speaking to the idea of property reinforcing social hierarchies. As Akhenaten’s power grew, there was steadier access to ownership and this ownership provided greater means to privacy for his wife and daughters. With the creation of buildings specifically labeled for Nefertiti or their daughters, these pieces of property become theirs to use as they please. Considering that privacy, in this piece, has examined how space is accessed by different social classes, royalty now had

45 Green, 10.
46 Ibid., 76.
access to a home, areas for lounging, areas for community, and temples constructed for them.

Deconstructing the private life of royals in Amarna gives an important insight to how one’s status was constructed through space, place, and decoration. Amarna depicted the lives of the Royal Family as rather private and separated; however, the architecture gives way to a life that is centered around family, community, and religion. Privacy comes off, now, as a privilege, accessible by those who sit in the highest echelon of ancient society – even though privacy was not taken advantage of extensively. The concept of privacy becomes optional, for one can note, through Figures 2 and 4, the presence of a possible bedroom and the image of the family playing the role of host and hostess to a group of people. Finally, the role of status is heavily constructed through the spatial construction of ancient Amarna, for those who lack the wherewithal to live their lives in a space comparable to a room sized for a princess.
Bibliography


Author Bio

James Martin will graduate from CSUSB with his B.A. in history in June 2020 and has enrolled at UC Riverside to pursue his M.Ed. and teaching credentials, in the summer. James studies San Bernardino history, LGBTQ+ history, Queer Theory, and social justice movements in the twentieth-century United States. James would like to thank Drs. Kate Liszka, Stephanie Muravchik, Jeremy Murray, and Yvette Saavedra for their contributions to his education. Lastly, James extends his deepest gratitude to his friends, family, and students – without their support, none of this would be possible.