

Fuzzy Boundaries and Multivalent Foci: Building Identities in the Early Northern Iroquoian Village – John L. Creese, University of Toronto

Boundaries and foci (both material and conceptual) represent twin organizing principals that become important in processes of identity formation at various social scales, from “individual” to “community”, within increasingly sedentary nucleated villages. Perhaps because of a post-enlightenment tendency to envision social categories such as kin, class, gender, or clan as un-problematically bounded cultural “givens”, and a western architectural canon that materializes such classifications through the ubiquitous use of durable walls and fences, archaeologists studying the social implications of spatial organization in non-western contexts have emphasized the significance of boundary formation at the expense of other structuring processes. The “focus” is another way of thinking about how daily activities and social groups are spatially ordered, one that privileges the accumulation of quotidian practices over planned architectural divisions. Unlike spaces defined by walls, foci are more fluid, permeable, ambiguous, and, importantly, multivalent. Thus, foci may act simultaneously as boundaries and centres; points of integration and segregation at different spatial and social scales. The articulation of boundaries and foci into a system that structured the performance of social identity during the first 450 years of Northern Iroquoian village development is explored in this paper. Social identities appear to have emerged referentially, with strong lineage-based corporate identity developing in response to challenges of integration at the community level, further stimulating the spatial classification and organization of individuals and nuclear families within highly ritualized domestic spaces.