

Arctic Social Sciences and Interdisciplinarity: Anthropological Perspectives on the Built Environment

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Ever since the International Polar Year (IPY) 2007/2008, interdisciplinarity seems to have arrived in arctic science. In the decade since, however, “interdisciplinarity blues” has set in among natural and social scientists alike. The author considers this a healthy sign of awareness that “disciplinarity” is not obsolete but the foundation for interdisciplinarity. The meeting point for different disciplines in arctic research has typically been the so-called natural environment, which often has dominated the outside (and inside) view of the Arctic. At the same time, the increasing involvement of social scientists has not only reminded us that the Arctic is inhabited by people but also that people modify the environment in which they dwell and thereby build it.

The focus of this presentation is on the affordances of the built environment and infrastructure for interdisciplinary arctic research. As a first step, the current state of social science research on infrastructure and the built environment in the Arctic, which was often considered to be of limited relevance compared with the natural environment, will be presented. Examples will include both large infrastructure projects, as well as the few social science attempts to address them academically. Transportation infrastructure will play a prominent role in this overview, addressing the possibilities and limitations of the existing projects by the author and others. This will provide an opportunity to think about future opportunities for increased collaboration between the natural and social sciences, including the involvement of engineers in it. After all, we want to understand why, how and what people build, and how the built rebuilds the people.