

# The *Measina* of Architecture in Sāmoa – An Examination of the *Vā* in Sāmoan Architecture and Socio-Cultural Implications of Architectural Changes

Fepulea'i Micah Van der Ryn

## Abstract

This paper is based on anthropological research over the last eighteen months in villages of both American Sāmoa and Sāmoa. The research has focused on examining through oral history (complemented by participant-observation) architectural changes in villages over the last fifty years and how these relate to other types of socio-cultural and economic changes. The premise of this paper is that traditional Sāmoan architecture of Sāmoa as embodied in the *fale tele*, the *fale afolau*, and the traditions of the *matua o faiva* are an extremely important *measina a Sāmoa* not only because of the intrinsic value they hold themselves as great achievements of Sāmoan material culture but also because of their function within the fabric of the less tangible aspects of Sāmoan culture – for example as a *modus operandi* for the articulation and practice of *vā* (the space of social relations) that bind and produce the cohesiveness of Sāmoan community. The paper will examine a few aspects of this functional relationship in both symbolic and practical dimensions. It will then also discuss some of the meaning and implications that changes in architectural forms and spaces have created within the experience of Sāmoan life. As this research is not yet completed, the comments, questions and suggestions offered at the end of the presentation will be especially helpful towards the completion of research and its write up. This research is part of Van der Ryn's work as Ethnographic Specialist at The Sāmoan and Pacific Studies Programme at American Sāmoa Community College and is towards his PhD degree at the University of Auckland.

## INTRODUCTION

When we think about *Measina a Sāmoa* — that is, what is precious and unique to Sāmoa and what is worth appreciating and sustaining within its heritage, we cannot help but examine the architecture of Sāmoa — a truly significant cultural and artistic achievement. Sāmoan architecture represents a unique form not only in Oceania, but also in the entire world. It is a significant symbol of the Sāmoan culture and way of life.

Traditional Sāmoan architecture, as embodied in the *fale tele*, the *fale afolau*, and the traditions of the *matua o faiva*, expresses special aesthetic qualities and a mastery of materials — a tangible product of Sāmoan culture. It is also an important expression of intangible aspects of Sāmoan culture embedded in customs, social structure, and ways of thinking and relating to the world. It is this connection between the tangible and the intangible dimensions of architecture and culture, and the implication of changes within this connection that I focus on in this paper. I pay particular attention to the various features of Sāmoan architecture that play a role as *modus operandi* for the articulation and practice of *vā*, the space of social relations that bind and produce the cohesiveness of Sāmoan community.

The paper is based on eighteen months of fieldwork, consisting of oral history interviewing, participant-observation, and village housing surveys in villages of both American Sāmoa and Sāmoa. I divide the paper into two parts. The first part examines 'traditional' Sāmoan cultural concepts of space and social relations and how these are expressed in the features of Sāmoan architecture and spatial construction. The second part examines the changes and their social implications.

## PART 1: TRADITIONAL RELATIONS OF SPACE AND SOCIETY THROUGH ARCHITECTURE IN SĀMOA

### The Sāmoan Concept of *Vā*

The Sāmoan term *vā* is a key Sāmoan concept that connects the tangible and intangible aspects of Sāmoan culture, principally the architecture, and a system of social relations into a



single cultural order, and thus is a core concept to my study. Architecture in Sāmoa provides a modus operandi for *vā*. *Vā* is relationship, connection, affiliation, boundaries, difference, separation, space, distance, responsibility, obligation, state of being, position, standing, and so much more (Le Tagaloa 2003:9).

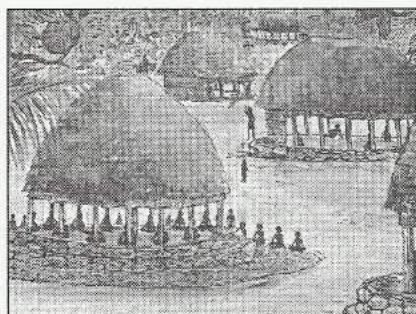


Figure 1: A village scene with a chiefs' meeting in progress in the *fale tele*  
Illustrator: Henry Utoaluga

*Vā* is the Sāmoan word for space, but also denotes social relations and the types of behavioural expectations and obligations they imply. *Vā* refers to the 'betweenness' of things that binds those things together in a relationship. My interviews on the topic of *vā* defined three basic categories of *vā*: 1) The *vā* between people and God — the Creator, 2) the *vā* between people, and 3) the *vā* between people and the created — the natural world. In a Sāmoan view, existence itself is the *vā*. Things do not exist without *vā*.

One's existence and well being at the individual, social, and environmental levels are all rooted to recognizing one's *vā* relationships. Social order is based on cultural assumptions about the nature of different *vā* relations; for example, such as between brother and sister, husband and wife, parents and children, extended family group and *matai*, *matai* and village council, and what types of behaviours and actions those relationships require. The importance of *vā* in Sāmoa is expressed frequently in such terms as *teu le vā* (take care of and tend to your relations) and *vā fealoa'i* (polite conduct in one's interactions with others).

Related to *vā* are the terms *feagaiga* and *fa'aaloalo*, which also have spatial reference. The root of *feagaiga* — is *feagai* — to face towards. The root of the word *fa'aaloalo* is *alo*, which has several meanings. The first definition in Milner's Sāmoan English dictionary is "the smooth, soft side of a thing (the front as opposed to the *tua* the 'back' or rougher side)". This meaning promotes the concept of 'front' as smoother and more polite, and back as rougher and less dictated by politeness.

These and other meanings define the spatiality of Sāmoan cultural behaviour and customs. There are cultural prescriptions for the order in which food or 'ava is served at a gathering, where one sits in front or back of a house, or up on chairs or down on the floor, and a hundred other daily actions making up family and community life. These prescriptions are context specific and depend on who the actors in the event are and what *vā* relations are being enacted. Most importantly, the social situations, events and behaviours are interpreted through the framework of understandings about *vā* as opposed to other possible interpretive frameworks for understanding social action. The *vā* conceptualization of space perceives space as points and their inter-relationships (known as the point-vector model) rather than an area contained by a boundary (the container model), which Herdrich states is the dominant mode of modelling space in Western society (Lehman F.K. & D. Herdrich 2002:80). We employ this container model when we talk about 'enough space' or 'space used up'. In the Sāmoan *vā* (point vector) system, boundaries are culturally understood and/or negotiated through and after the establishment of the *vā*. The open feature of Sāmoan architecture fully facilitates this principle, a point that Sāmoan choreographer/dancer, Lemi Ponifasio makes:

The concept of Sāmoan existence is called *vā* and I base my dance on that. It means space and it means we are always negotiating the truth at that moment. Nothing is absolute. A Sāmoan house is



a good example of this concept. It's open, there's no privacy; you have to negotiate how you exist in that. A Western house has closed doors, so it's easy (Mallon 2002: 207).

## 'TRADITIONAL' SĀMOAN VILLAGE SPACE AND ARCHITECTURE

The houses were placed in the circumference of a circle, about 150 fathoms in diameter, the center of which formed a vast open place, with a grass-plate of the most beautiful verdure; ... I entered the handsomest of these huts, which probably belonged to the Chief, when how great was my surprise, to see a large room of lattice work, equally well executed with any of those about Paris. The best architect could not have given a more elegant curve to the extremities of the ellipsis that terminated this cabin; a range of columns at five feet distance from each other was placed all round it: these columns were made of trunks of trees wrought with great nicety, between which, fine mats [the Sāmoan *pola* blinds], artfully laid one on the other like the scales of a fish, were elevated or let down by cords like our lattices (Journal of La Perouse 1788).

This 1788 description of Aasu village indicates a village layout and architecture that resembles contemporary understandings of 'ideal' and 'traditional' Sāmoan settlement and architecture. Thus I believe that 1788 provides a historical bench mark to indicate that the basic features of Sāmoan village layout and building structure understood as 'traditional' today may date back well over two hundred years.

### Two 'Traditional' Types of Prestige Structures

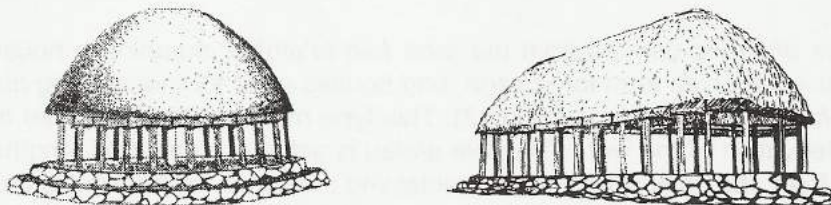


Figure 2: Two traditional types: *Fale tele* (left) *Fale afolau* (right)  
Illustrator: Henry Utoaluga

The *fale tele* and the *fale afolau* (also called *fale utopoto*) are two main types of traditional Sāmoan prestige structures involving the commissioning of specialized traditional craftsmen (*matua o faiva* or *tufuga fai fale*). All other types of smaller structures, such as *umu kuka* (cookhouses) or *faleo'o* (small work or sleeping houses) were usually self built by the family and did not have prestige associations to titles.

#### ***Fale Tele***

The *fale tele* (big house), also called the *fale lāpotopoto* (round-house), typically has one, two, or three central posts (*pou tū*) holding up the roof at the centre. The house La Perouse described in 1788 appears to be a *fale tele*. The floor plan is made from a front and back straight *itū* (side) at which there are usually three *pou lalo* (sitting posts) sandwiched between the two large semicircular *tala* (or curved ends). The *pou lalo* are usually placed at intervals of between four to six feet.



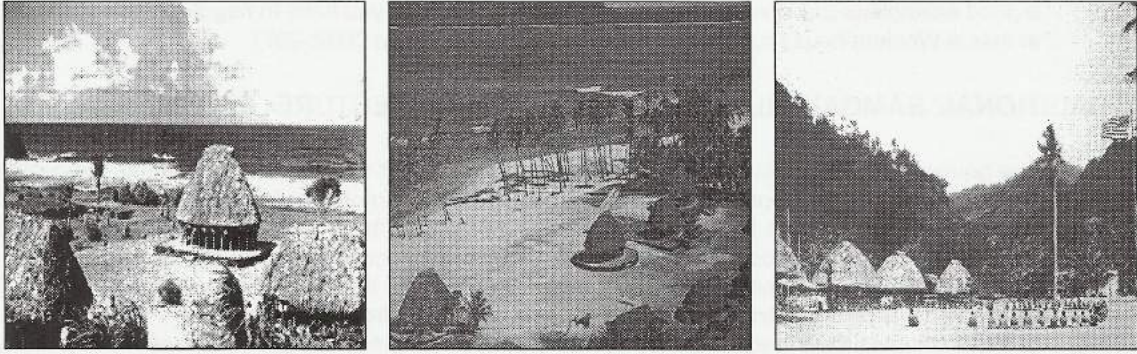


Figure 3: Three villages of Tutuila: Lauli'i (left), Auasi (middle), Faga'itua (right), showing predominance of *fale tele* guesthouses surrounding the village *malae*. (photos taken between 1930 –1940)  
Source: American Sāmoa Historical Preservation Office

The term *fale tele* literally means big house, and I have heard the term regularly used in this way among family members to refer to the largest structure on the family compound, regardless of its form and construction (that is, it could actually be a *fale afolau* or other structure type). The fact that the term *fale tele* is also the label for the roundhouse type supports the view that the *fale afolau* may have developed after the *fale tele*.

### **Fale Afolau**

The term *fale afolau* is derived from the term *fale fa'afolau*, meaning a house like a *fale afolau*. *Folau* is the polite term for voyage, and houses used for storing long distance ships were called *fale afolau* (Te Hiroa 1930:12). This type of structure is long like a boathouse, hence, the derivation of the word. The *fale afolau* is actually created by lengthening the *itū* (the straight front and back sides) while maintaining the same dimensions to the curved *tala* (ends). The other name applied to this elongated *fale tele* is *fale utupoto*. The *utupoto* are tie or crossbeams connecting the tops of the inner set of house posts, a structural feature absent in *fale tele*, which have the *so'a* (collar beams) instead. A *matua o faiva* (master builder) would not ask a chief if he wanted a *fale tele* or *fale afolau*, but rather if he wanted *so'a* or *utupoto* on the house. House size is measured by counting the number of *utupoto* or *so'a*, not by actual measurement of height, widths and lengths (Te Hiroa 1930:87).

### **Some Evaluative Points on Fale Tele and Fale Afolau**

I researched perceived differences in cultural use, value and significance of the *fale tele* and *fale afolau*. Some informants said that according to Sāmoan tradition, only *ali'i* were to have *fale tele*; *tulāfale* were to have *fale afolau*. The oral history accounts of different villages of both Sāmoa and American Sāmoa in the 1940s indicate that this belief was the practice at that time, but today there was no such distinction made. Interviewees also remembered that it was common for both high ranking *ali'i* and *tulāfale* to have *fale afolau* as their main residential or sleeping house (*fale tōfā*) and also have *fale o'o* (smaller house, usually self-built by the family) to house lower ranking untitled men or young couples of the household (as is still the case in many villages today).

Some elderly informants stated that *fale tele* carry more prestige or dignity (*mamalu*) than the *fale afolau*. One elderly *matua* in Savai'i gave the reason being that *fale tele* had fewer orator posts — the *itū* (the straight front and back sides) are very short, but the *tala* (curving end sides) are proportionately large, which effectively reduces the number of *tulāfale* sitting posts in front. I then asked what *mamalu* meant and he replied (in Sāmoan) “to be unified as one mind with only one voice needed”. In a corresponding manner, a different elderly chief offered that the *fale afolau* was the appropriate structure for talking chiefs because it had more orator posts, and because the *itū* are longer. We can also deduce another explanation.



If *ali'i* titles hold greater *mamalu* (prestige) than the parallel *tulāfale* titles, and if *fale tele* are the associated structures to *ali'i* titles, then it makes sense that the *fale tele* would be more *mamalu*.

There is debate about which may have evolved first, the *fale tele* or the *fale afolau*, and the topic is the focus of another paper (Shawn Barnes) presented at the Measina a Sāmoa Conference, so I do not go into depth here. There are different Sāmoan legends, which point to one or the other type as having come first, but my own thoughts are that the *fale tele* most probably developed first. Several things support this conclusion, mainly its association with *ali'i*, and the descriptive label itself 'big house'. Perhaps the rank and power of *tulāfale* evolved later within the cultural development of Sāmoa, which would fit with the *fale afolau* developing later as a structure associated with the prestige of *tulāfale*. Prior to that, the only 'big houses' would have been the *fale tele* associated with *ali'i*. Archaeological and historical records support this view.

A technical aspect worth noting is that the *fale afolau*, unlike the *fale tele*, permits an increase in floor area without an equally corresponding increase in roof height, which could also account for the relative difference in prestige value, and also support the view that the *fale afolau* developed after the *fale tele*.

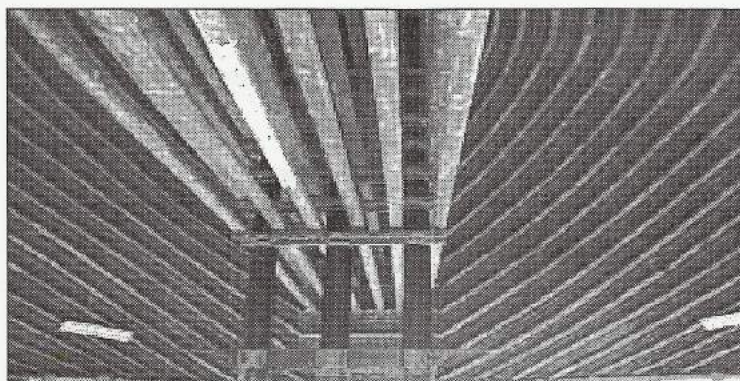


Figure 4: Interior view of *fale tele* roof. Seen are three *pou tū* (central posts), the *vaega fau* (curved purlins), the *so'a* (collar beams) and the canoe shaped *tali* at the bottom. The width of the three *pou tū* indicate the length of the *itū* (straight front and back sides). In a *fale afolau* the *itū* are elongated and the *pou tū* are changed to an inner parallel line of posts joined at the top by tie beams. Source: American Sāmoa Historical Preservation Office.

A distinguishing feature of both traditional *fale tele* and *fale afolau*, and an identifying mark of a skilled *tufuga fai fale* (master builder), is the longitudinal convex curve of the roof slope, which required the coveted knowledge and skill of *matua o faiva* to achieve. This curve adds aesthetic, engineering and symbolic value to the structure. When I look up into the intricate and elegant fastenings in the roof of a *fale tele*, the arching purlins of lashed breadfruit wood and the tier of collar beams (*so'a*) ascending to the roof peak, I see a symbolization of the Sāmoan cosmos, including the nine levels of heaven described in Sāmoan creation myths (Powell 1887:145–175).

## NINE FEATURES OF SĀMOAN ARCHITECTURE AND SPACE

### 1. *Malae* as a focus and centre in village layout

The nucleated Sāmoan settlement surrounding an open oval or round central ceremonial ground called *malae* is the quintessential Sāmoan village layout, which La Perouse described of Aasu in 1788. Figure 5 diagrams the form and figure 6 is an aerial photograph of the form in the village of Faga'iuta in Tutuila in 1961.

The *malae* and the legends attached to it feature significantly in the identity and ceremonial life of a Sāmoan village. For example, Sāmoan custom dictates that ceremonial



salutations begin with honouring the dignity of the village *malae*, further evidence of the sacred identity that a *malae* brings to a village.

In the ideal village layout shown in figure 5, the *maota* of the highest-ranking chief(s) of the village are placed at the end of the *malae* and the *laoa* of the high-ranking *tulāfale* are situated on the sides. This pattern duplicates the prescribed sitting, and therefore complementary *vā* arrangements, of *ali'i* and *tulāfale* at house posts during chiefly meetings.

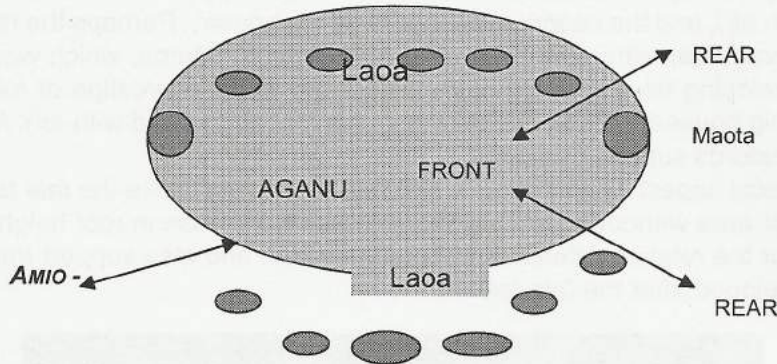


Figure 5: Sāmoan village layout  
Illustrator: Henry Utoaluga.



Figure 6: A 1961 aerial photo of Faga'itua village, Tutuila. The oval *malae*, which at this time was covered in white sand, is clearly visible ringed by round and oval guesthouses  
Source: Department of Commerce, American Samoa.

The *malae* also provides spatial orientation. Front is towards the *malae*. Rear is facing or moving away from the *malae*. People's conduct in the village, particularly on the *malae*, is guided by *aganu'u* (culture), which guides and prescribes proper village conduct. As one moves away from the *malae* and towards the rear, individual behaviour may become influenced more by *āmio* — the idiosyncratic behaviour reflective of individual personalities and feelings — than the *aga* of *aganu'u* (Shore 1982:153–160).

## 2. *Fale talimālō* (village guesthouses) — the socially most valued structures.

*Fale talimālō* (guesthouses) are traditionally the most important and valued village structures (besides the historically more recent addition of churches) because they signify the villages' constituent chiefly titles and their associated extended family clans, and because they are used to receive visiting groups, conduct village ceremonies or other affairs of the village.



Their placement in front facing the *malae* helps demonstrate this value, together with the fact that traditionally they were the largest structures and involved the greatest investment of labour and resources of all the other structures (excluding churches).

The main village *matai* titles constituting a village's political structure are given physical expression through *the fale talimālō* and their arrangement around the *malae*. This is further reinforced by two features: 1) the naming of the land upon which each guesthouse stands and, 2) the naming of the guesthouse itself (which may or may not be different from the name of the land). These names are often encoded in the *fa'alupega* (honorific callings) of each village, which together with the *fale talimālō* supports the political power of the title and its perpetuity and rootedness to the village.

I also learned that it is more appropriate for village meetings be held in the orator's guesthouses, not in the *ali'i*'s guesthouse, which are considered more *mamalu* (prestigious, dignified and sacred) and thus should be appropriately reserved for more prestigious occasions, such as the reception of important guests to the village. This custom, which I found Sāmoan villages practising in 2004, respects the *vā* and complementary relationship (or *feagaiga*) of *ali'i* and *tulāfale*. The distinguishing complementary relationship of *ali'i* and *tulāfale* is also reflected linguistically in the polite referencing of the houses of *tulāfale* as *laoa*, and the houses of *ali'i* as *maota*.

The guesthouse also provides the functional space for extended family meetings and *fa'alavelave* (life crisis events). The continued existence of guesthouses reinforces the perpetuation of the Sāmoan extended family system and the associated *matai* system.

### 3. Open/ wall-less

Openness is the most outstanding feature of Sāmoan architecture and space. The exterior and interior of the house are experienced as one continuum, which walls and fences would disrupt. The *fale afolau*, *fale tele* and *fale o'o* are all traditionally wall-less, having only woven blinds (*pola*), which are typically lowered only to keep out adverse weather, not for privacy, except when there is sickness inside. The open 'wall-less' principle extends to surrounding environment, evidenced by a lack of fences or walls in the landscape of the village.

Some have remarked that Sāmoan houses are the most open in the world. When questioned about this openness, most informants mentioned the advantage of freely receiving the cooling breezes. Some stated it is a symbol of Sāmoan hospitality. *Papālagi* (foreigners) are more likely to be concerned about lack of privacy.

The cultural and phenomenological significance of openness is that the highly enhanced interior/exterior visual flow helps put *vā* at the forefront of one's consciousness. One researcher states that it also promotes an externalized personality type with social control relying on public view (Keene 1978:305-306).

The openness also facilitates political transparency during village and family meetings. If it is a *matai* meeting, those not directly participating, such as the *'aumaga* (the untitled village men) and others who are non-titled, sit outside the structure listening and watching the proceedings, thereby learning the political process.

My observations and interviews revealed well over a dozen other practical benefits of the wall-less architecture, including ease of cleaning, childcare, and supervision of family chores.

### 4. One room under one roof

Feature IV is the lack of internal wall divisions, and is thus a part of the openness of feature III. However, here the openness is internal to the structure and does not necessarily include permeability of interior and exterior space. Feature III cannot occur without Feature IV, but the reverse is not true. You can have exterior walls, but no internal walls, which is a common occurrence in many newer Sāmoan village structures.



## 5. Rounded ends (*tala*)

Of all indigenous Polynesian architectures, only Sāmoa and Tonga have oval or round floor plans. The rest are rectangular. My surveys found that Sāmoans felt that rounded ends, after openness, was the second most important feature of their architecture. My observations and interviews revealed functional advantages to rounded ends. For example, visibility between individuals sitting at their appointed posts during council meetings is greatly enhanced. The *pou matua* (the end post) where the highest-ranking *ali'i* sits is spatially marked by the curve. The awkwardness of sitting at a corner post (if it is a rectangular structure) is avoided. This advantage points to *vā*. A secondary point is that from the engineering perspective, the rounded ends are also more aerodynamic and can better withstand hurricane force winds.

## 6. Multiple and ranked structures within household compounds

As opposed to living in a single structure with internal walls to divide and separate spaces for different household functions and individual members' use (as is common in Western architecture), Sāmoan households feature multiple and ranked structures on a family compound. These structures are also ranked. In front is the guesthouse, and decreasing in rank behind it are the main chief's residence, *fale o'o* of extended family members, the *umu kuka* (cook house) and then the toilet.

Generally, each structure can be seen as serving the same purpose as a separate internal room seen in Western architecture. From the phenomenological standpoint, occupying your own space (say in a *fale o'o*) while still being able to view the activities of others throughout the external and internal spaces of the family compound is quite different than occupying your own little room in a house, visually shut off from people in neighbouring rooms.

This Sāmoan system requires a larger land area than a single structure plan, but it retains all the other essential features I am describing. In addition, it allows for better air circulation to each structure.

## 7. Social and symbolic significance of house posts

Whereas walls signify important dimensions of social structure within Western architecture, it is the posts in the wall-less architecture of Sāmoa that signify political and social relationships. This significance becomes most activated during formal meetings of village social organizations, such as meetings of chiefs (*matai*), chiefs' wives (*faletua ma tausī*), untitled men (*'aumaga*), or unmarried women (*auvaluma*). The general principle of the seating arrangements which has been described in a number of other works (UNESCO 1992:12-13, Allen 1993:284-285, Shore 1982:80, Duranti 1981:52) is one in which the high chiefs sit at the end posts, talking chiefs at front posts, and the untitled attendants on the rear side. Again, front is towards the *malae*. While posts are physical points in the landscape with social and political significance, they also feature as the points in the *vā* (point-vector) conception of space described earlier.

## 8. Front/rear orientations

The front/rear (*luma/tua*) ranking of space has already been mentioned within the context of describing other features, but it is important to recognize that it is a separate feature of spatial construction. Rear is seen as subservient to front. Sāmoan custom dictates that people providing service (*tautua*) must enter from and sit in the rear of structures. Visitors as well as higher-ranking people (those to be served) enter from and sit at the front of the house. The front/rear spatial orientation provides an organizing spatial principle to Sāmoan social life and organization. Even social groups and roles are named through these spatial orientations. The



words *luma* and *tua* are found in the following terms for social statuses: *aualuma* (association of unmarried village women), *faletua* (wife of high chief or minister) *tautua* (used both as a verb — to serve, and as a noun to refer to those doing the serving.)

## 9. Flexible use of household spaces

Flexibility and versatility characterize Sāmoan use of domestic space (in either a Western or Sāmoan style building). Eating, weaving, praying, sleeping, meeting and many other activities (other than cooking and toilet related activities) may occur within the same space at different times. The traditional lack of furniture other than the mats (which are easily lifted or dragged from spot to spot, or rolled and put away) supports this flexible use. Today, Western style furniture, such as chairs, tables, storage cabinets, beds, etc., have gained popularity, though placing these items around the perimeter of rooms or buildings still allows flexibility. Interestingly, today, the presence of furniture is also an indicator of the house being a “residence” as opposed to a guesthouse.

This flexibility provided by the uncluttered openness is also an element in the practices of *vā*. *Vā* are not fixed relations in space, but rather are configured according to those who are present at any given time. When furniture is present in the space, one will often find it being quickly moved around to accommodate a proper configuration of the space appropriate to the specific social situation at hand.

### Part 1. CONCLUSION

In identifying and describing the nine features and principles for understanding Sāmoan architecture and spatial construction, I hope to have demonstrated both the practical and the socially significant dimensions of the architecture, particularly in reference to the concepts and practices of *vā*, which now become important in examining the changes.

### PART 2: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY WITHIN SĀMOAN VILLAGE SPACES AND SOCIETY

Nowhere in Polynesia today is the opportunity for studying native house building better than in Sāmoa. With the same admirable tenacity shown in maintaining their own mode of social and political life, the natives of this island group continue to prefer their own form of dwelling, and wisely, for it combines perfect adaptation to environment with simplicity and beauty of craftsmanship (Handy 1923:3).

As Handy indicates in the above quote, Sāmoa has held on to its indigenous architectural traditions much better than most other areas of Polynesia, and perhaps for good reason. Nonetheless, the last thirty or more years of globalization (long after Hardy made his observation) has tightened its grip on Sāmoan life. The dramatic impacts can be seen both architecturally and socially throughout the Sāmoan archipelago. I now briefly examine the agents of the change, the details of the change in architecture, and the socio-cultural implications.

#### Agents of Change 1940–2004

##### *World War II*

World War II brought 12,000 U.S. marines to Western Sāmoa (then under New Zealand administration) and 4,000 to Tutuila and Manu’a in American Sāmoa. The marines not only built airports, roads, movie theatres, and hospitals, but also many other structures throughout the many different villages where they camped. Their presence in the villages was strongly felt. Many of my interviewees spoke of this time as bringing major changes to their villages in terms of both ideas and materials. After the war, the marines left behind the physical



structures they had built from imported materials, which many villagers recycled into their own building projects. One informant remarked about their marvel at seeing screen wire for the first time and how useful they felt it would be.

The roads, built either by marines or later by governments, made many villages more motor vehicle accessible, but have had several impacts on village layout or even location. Where the road went inland of a coastal village, the village has in some cases completely relocated to be near the road, as is the case with Aoloau and Aasu in Tutuila, or Vaie'e, Fusi and Fausaga in 'Upolu. The other pattern has been the development of an inland portion of the village (*uta*) near the main road, as in Salamumu in 'Upolu, and Neiafu and Faleālupo in Savai'i.

In many cases roads were built straight through the middle of village *malae*, which meant that traffic could interfere with village activities. Some villages made a point to have the road be built around the outside of the village, as is the case in Faga'itua, Tutuila. See figure 7 below.

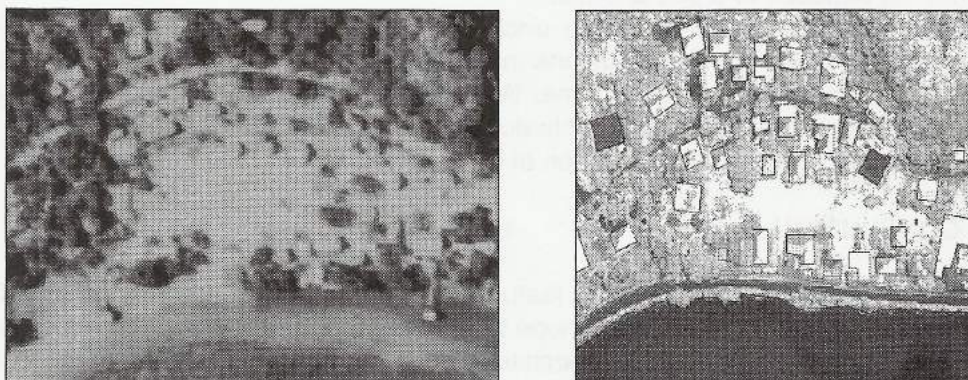


Figure 7: Aerial photos Faga'itua Village 1961 (left) and 2001 (right). Visible are the space of the *malae*, the outline of house structures (notice the change from round to rectangular) and the addition of the main road on the coast side.

Source: American Sāmoa Historical Preservation Office

An interesting spatial orientation problem occurs in this type of case for those houses between the road and the *malae*. Which way should the house face? Which way should be considered front — the *malae* side or the roadside? This situation spatially indicates an antagonism between tradition and modernity. Do you face inwards to the *malae* and the internal set of *vā* relations that govern village life, or do you put your back to that and face the road and the way out from tradition?

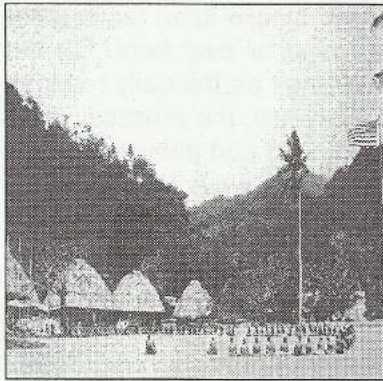
### *Hurricanes*

Indeed the much-publicized 'Cyclone Ofa' which battered the Sāmoas for three days in February 1990 with over 100 knot winds left the islands littered with the wreckage of destroyed European style houses, which had low profile roofs. In contrast most *fale*, provided they were sufficiently inland to escape the fury of the sea, remained intact save for a 'frowsy' thatch here and there (UNESCO 1991:10).

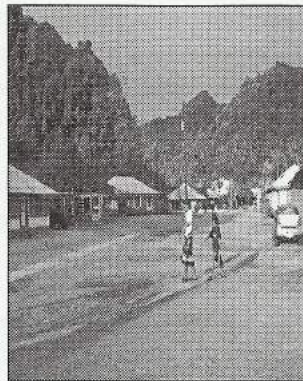
Despite local experience and scientific observations of the strength of traditionally well-built Sāmoan houses to withstand hurricane strength winds, many informants stated that having a cement blockhouse within their family was important for when bad weather struck. It provided a sense of 'security'. Others stated that the increase of such structures was really a matter of 'keeping up'. When a hurricane destroys an older traditional guest *fale*, it is difficult nowadays to find anyone with knowledge and skills to rebuild them the old way. If you can find that person, my informants told me, you must also be prepared to spend much more than you would for the newer style of building using imported materials. Thus, house changes often coincide with hurricanes.



American Sāmoa is a little different than Sāmoa because of The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In 1966, a major hurricane tore through the entire Sāmoan archipelago, flattening many villages. That was the year that FEMA began its practice in American Sāmoa of allocating families with financial aid to rebuild homes according to a specific Western design adapted for American Sāmoa, using imported materials.



(a) Faga'itua 1930: view from the *malae*



(b) Faga'itua 2004 (same angle)



(c) 1966 Hurricane House in Faga'itua

Figure 8: Faga'itua Village — guesthouses lining the *malae* are essentially in the same place in 2004 as they were in 1930, but all the structures have been replaced with modern forms, many of which are the square FEMA 'hurricane house' from 1966, shown in photo c, which is being used as a family guesthouse. Source: American Sāmoa Historical Preservation Office.

A large but decreasing percentage of these square cement structures still stand in American Sāmoa today. Other 'hurricane house' designs were implemented after other hurricanes, and those structures are also visible. Currently, FEMA's policy is just to issue a cheque and allow people to rebuild according to their own wishes.

#### *Socio-economic factors*

When Sāmoans began more fully embracing the cash economy beginning in the 1950s, particularly when migration to overseas employment and education began to rise, two things increased within Sāmoan populations: 1) the ability to buy imported building materials, and 2) a taste for other architectural styles, spatial uses and life styles. When overseas Sāmoans sent money home, one of the things they wished to see was their families build more modern Western style structures, which then became a new kind of family status symbol, signifying success in the global market economy. The development of paved roads and bigger wharfs facilitated the importation of materials, while vocational schools developed the Western construction knowledge and skills among many young men who might have otherwise been apprentices to the *matua o faiva*. This not only meant fewer commissions to traditional *matua o faiva* to build traditional structures, but also a disruption to the transmission of traditional building knowledge and skills to the younger generation. The present day result is that it is difficult for a chief to build a traditional Sāmoan guesthouse because there are so few remaining *matua o faiva* who hold the knowledge and skill.

#### **The Process of Physical Changes in Materials and Forms**

The architectural transformations are not so simply described as substituting traditional Sāmoan buildings for Western looking structures. There are different types of modifications and incorporations that occur in stages over time and also occur differentially. Structures of the village and within each household compound evolve over time differently. For example, there is the tendency for the guesthouses to remain more architecturally conservative, as



they serve more traditional functions of the society. Most efforts to perpetuate traditional Sāmoan architectural forms and space are applied to *fale talimālō* in part because of practical considerations. For example, *fa'alavelave* usually require the inflow and outflow of many people and items over a number of days. The open nature of the guesthouse, uncluttered by furniture or possessions and lacking walls, helps facilitate an easier flow.

Today, there is added social prestige when a chief can build a guesthouse with more traditional design principles and mastery of materials, as opposed simple open rectangular form, which is currently almost the standard rather than the round or oval form. On the other hand, residential houses may undergo greater levels of change as the daily routines of individual family life take on less traditional Sāmoan forms. However, the practical value of building the thatched *fale o'o* continues, as they are cheap to build and pleasant to rest in, particularly in the heat of the day. As Sāmoans continue to develop ways to incorporate traditional values and practices with newly developed ones, the structures they build reflect their desires to combine these different elements.

### Stage 1: Traditional designs and construction with new materials

Substitution of locally produced building materials with imported ones is the first stage in architectural change, as illustrated in Figure 9abc. In this case, thatch is replaced by iron roofing, and cement is added to the foundation. A similar substitution is seen in two photos of the Leoso Guesthouse (a *fale afolau*) in Leone in 1930 and 2004, in Figure 10ab. The outer wooden house posts of the Leoso guesthouse have also been replaced with cement ones, though the inner posts are the original wooden ones.

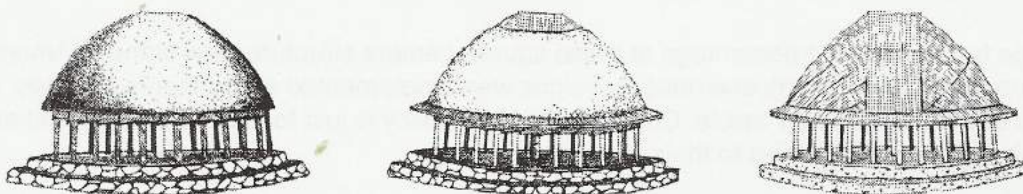


Figure 9a, b, c: Showing a progression of the substitution of imported materials (metal roofing and cement foundations) in a *fale tele*. Note that the middle drawing shows the common use of metal roofing at the peak and on the bottom edge of roof while retaining thatch in the middle  
Illustrator: Henry Utoaluga.



Figure 10ab: The Leoso guesthouse in Leone, Tutuila in 1930 and 2004. The only things that have been changed are the roofing material and the outer posts, which are now cement  
Source: American Sāmoa Historic Preservation Office.

The substitution of new materials results in a minimal change in architectural form and space. The use of iron roofing allows for the addition of one small architectural form change (which is evident in Figures 9 and 10) — that is an extended eave (*fa'atautau*) to draw water away from the edge of the house. The other advantages informants gave for using iron roofing over thatch was that it did not need to be replaced as often and was faster to put up. They admitted, however, that it is hotter, and makes too much noise when it is raining.

The advantage of a floor made of cement instead of pebbles is questionable. Some informants thought it was more hygienic. I could not scientifically confirm this point, but I did



notice that cement requires more frequent sweeping and when wet it can also cause people or children to slip and get hurt. It is possible that having a cement floor just fits an ideological need to be 'modern'.

The material changes can affect social relations and local production. In the case of the Leoso guest *fale*, one family member reported that the *sa'o* (head chief) used to have each branch of the family grow and supply a portion of sugarcane thatch required for the roof, for re-thatching every five to seven years. Now, one person purchases the corrugated iron roofing for the whole structure every twenty years, and no one grows the sugarcane thatch.

## Stage 2: Change in materials, construction and design

Substituting new materials creates an impetus to change construction techniques and designs, and has other economic ramifications. For example, the traditional *fale tele* or *fale afolau* requires thousands of feet of 'afa (the braided coconut husk twine), the making of which was traditionally an occupation of elderly men. As nails have replaced 'afa, its production is now low. The largest demand is from hotels, who have more capital, which then drives the price for 'afa out of the range of the average homebuilder.

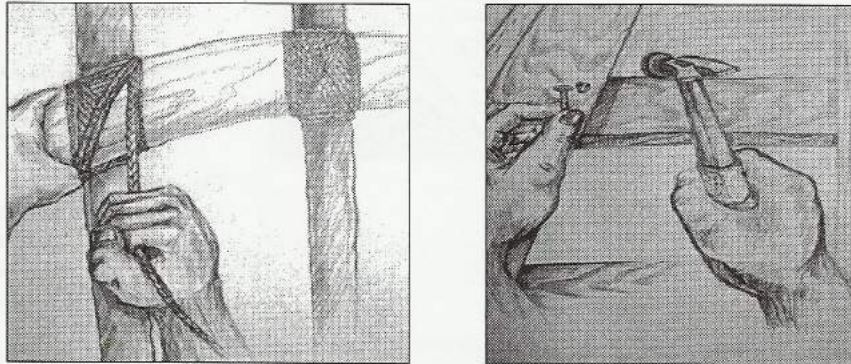


Figure 11: a. (left) construction using the 'afa (coconut husk twine), the 'Sāmoan nail'. (right) hammer, nail, and sawn timber construction – Sāmoans have chosen it because it is faster and 'cheaper', but some say not as strong as the 'afa.

As for the change in roofing material, it takes a special skill to bend and fit metal roofing to a curved roof and to attach it to the lattice structure of the roof underneath. It also ends up often wasting more roofing material than if the roof were square or rectangular. Iron roofing does not require the same steep roof pitch as thatch, so a lower roof subsequently requires less roofing material. Thus, when metal roofing is substituted, an economic and practical impetus is created to change the form to a rectangular floor plan with a lower pitched hip roof construction. The result is what Sāmoans call the *fale 'apa* (pictured in Figure 12), which my surveys indicate is the most common type of residential structure in the villages of Independent Sāmoa, and also the most common form of guesthouse in American Sāmoa. It maintains the features of openness (no external or internal walls or divisions), and the importance of posts, but it loses the rounded ends and other aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of the traditional roof. Note how the hip roof maintains the semblance of a *tala*.

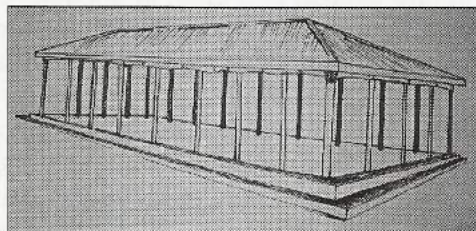
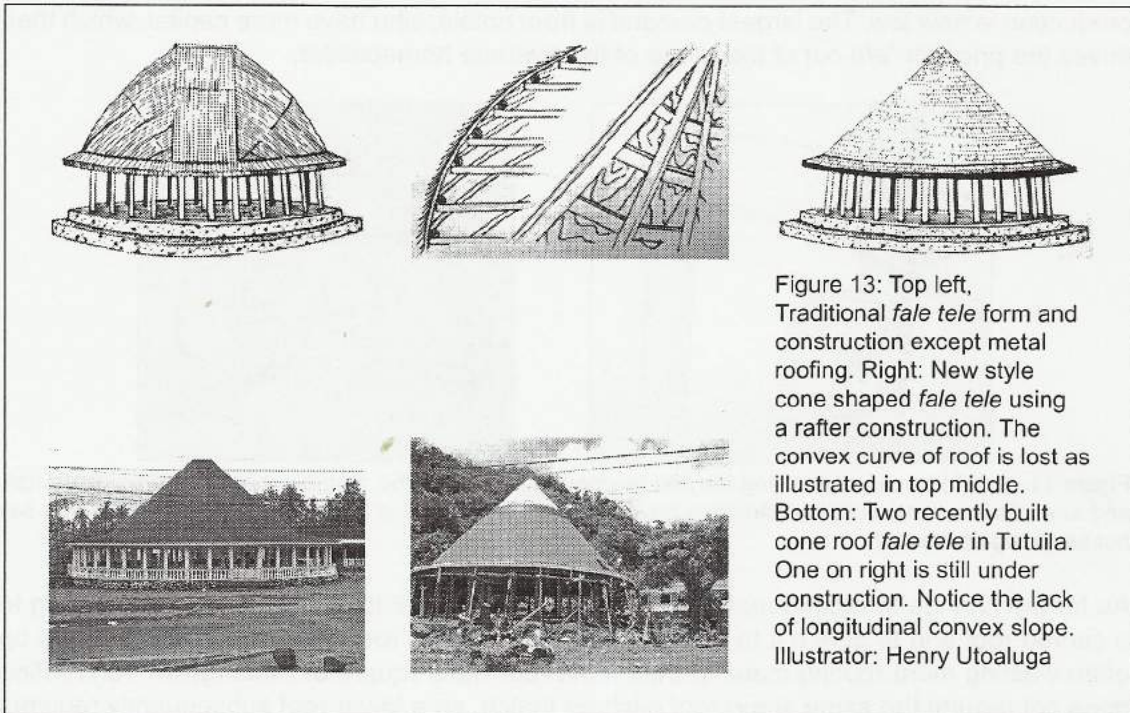


Figure 12: A *fale 'apa*  
Illustrator: Henry Utoaluga.



Because the *fale 'apa* is still open, most Sāmoan informants did not classify it as a *fale pālāgi* or European style house, though the Sāmoan government surveying division used the term 'open European house'.

Though the rectangular *fale 'apa* appears to be the practical and economical choice for a socially acceptable guesthouse in either Sāmoa these days, the ability to build a more traditional type structure accrues more prestige for the associated chief and his descent group. One resulting development that I have observed in American Sāmoa in the last fifteen years has been a return among some chiefs to building oval or round *fale talimālō*. However, because rafter construction (*fale faiivi*) using imported lumber and materials has been adopted almost universally, and there is a lack of traditional materials and skills to build the old way, new forms have developed, such as the cone shaped *fale tele* depicted in figure 13 (below). These structures use almost all made of imported materials, including cement house posts. However, asphalt or wooden shingles has replaced the use of corrugated iron roofing. The important traditional feature missing is the convex curve to the roof slope.



### Hybrid Forms

I identify two general kinds of hybrid forms. The first trades some traditional architectural features for new ones, as in trading rounded ends (*tala*) for square corners, while retaining openness, such as in the *fale 'apa* design. Another less common example, is enclosed Sāmoan shaped houses (not shown or described here). These are generally residences, not guesthouses. The other hybrid type that has developed more recently combines Sāmoan and non-Sāmoan features by adding them non-uniformly to the design, such as a structure that is partially enclosed in one section and open in another. Originally, these hybrid forms evolved by making extensions on existing structures, as illustrated in Figure 14b. First there is just a *fale 'apa* that a family is living in, signified by furniture and possessions. As possessions accumulate, the need for an uncluttered area for receiving guests increases, or a need for greater security of the possessions develops, the enclosed extension is built. My village housing surveys indicated that this particular structural type (called *fale 'apa fai fa'ase'e fai potu*) was increasingly gaining popularity. People explain it has the advantages of the Sāmoan style in the front and the *pālāgi* style in the back. Extensions of this sort are also commonly added onto open oval Sāmoan style houses (that is, elliptical in shape), and even



onto smaller *fale o'o*. The back section is still seen as serving the front section, according to the traditional principle.

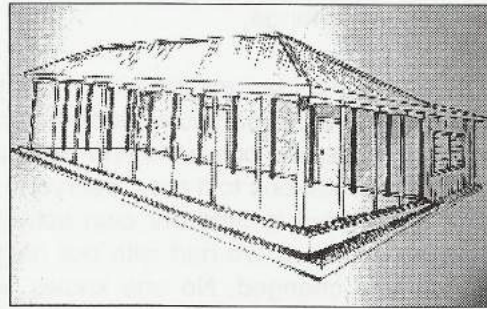
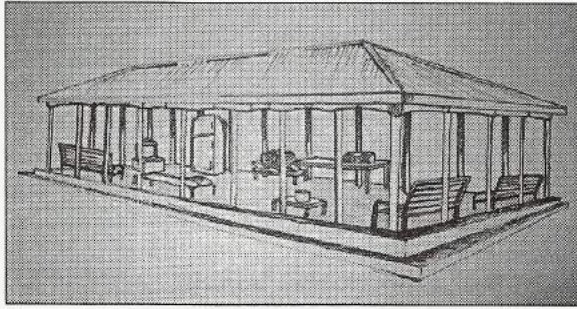


Figure 14ab: Left) a *fale 'apa* with furniture in it, including refrigerator, television, tables, and chairs indicating its use as a residential house. Right) *fale 'apa fai fa'ase'e fai potu*  
Illustrator: Henry Utoaluga.

The next stage of hybrid forms are structures designed in advance to combine different features in different sections of the house, rather than these being added over time as extensions from the back. This provides a more uniform look to the structure. Lack of space prevents examples from being shown here.

#### *The Fale Fa'apālagi Trend*

The non-traditional Sāmoan structures so far described still do not fit the label of a *fale fa'apālagi* (often just referred to as *fale pālagi*) which is a structure that has corners and external walls. Internal division of walls is not a criteria for a *fale pālagi*. As family wealth permits, *fale pālagi* become larger and more elaborate. This pattern can be seen in both Sāmoas, though proportionate to population American Sāmoa has a greater number of large and elaborate *fale pālagi*.

The original major motivation for building *fale pālagi* could be stated as social status. It was at first a sign of wealth, as already described, but currently it has almost become the norm in villages throughout Sāmoa. My surveys of four villages in Independent Sāmoa indicated that the *fale pālagi* was the third most common household structure, while in American Sāmoan villages, it is easily the most common structure. Having an enclosed house to 'live in' or at least to secure your possessions, even if you choose to sleep in an open house, has become the norm for the majority of villages. In American Sāmoa, it is now just a matter of making them bigger and more elaborate to 'keep up with the neighbours'. For in American Sāmoa, Western or American concepts of privacy have also become incorporated to some extent into the cultural values of the society, particularly in the younger half of the population

I would like to conclude by briefly outlining a few significances I see in the architectural changes.

1. The large *fale pālagi* residences represent a shift away from the traditional value of the *fale talimālō* being the most important structure of a family and the village. The *fale pālagi* residence may now dwarf the Sāmoan style *fale talimālō* next to or in front of it.
2. The desire within a family to build a *fale pālagi* does not necessarily equate to a desire to want to live in it. There are cases of villages in Sāmoa where each family has a *fale pālagi*, but everyone lives their daily lives mostly in their *fale o'o* next to or behind the *fale pālagi*, stating that the *fale pālagi* is too hot.
3. The *fale pālagi* in Sāmoa may still retain traditional continuities in its less material features, for example, front/rear orientations, flexible use of space, and a lot of open interior space.



- There may definitely be a change in the forms that sociality and spatiality are taking within the Sāmoan culture that is directly a result of the change in the architecture, as opposed to the architecture being only a reflection of the change.

The fourth point targets the aim of this paper, which is to understand the social implications of the changes, in particular with respect to the Sāmoan conceptualizations and practices of *vā* in daily life. As one American Sāmoan informant who has lived through and experienced the transformations told me, "Everyone in the village used to know what everyone else was doing. We tried to time our own activities in unison, like eating etc., and we were always sharing whatever we had with our neighbours. Now that we all live in *fale pālagi* that has completely changed. No one knows what others are doing in their houses, and it is not considered anybody else's business to know."

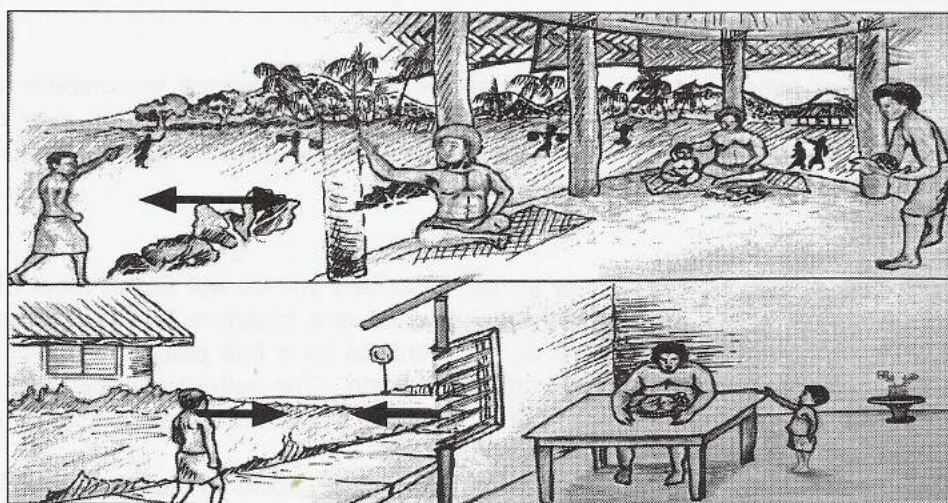


Figure 15: Comparing *vā* activation living in a *fale Sāmoa* and in a *fale pālagi*. The *vā* is illustrated by the arrow. In the lower drawing the *vā* is blocked by the wall, and no social interaction occurs. Illustrator: Henry Utoaluga.

Figure 15 sums up my conclusion. The illustration contrasts life in an open Sāmoan style *fale* with that in a more closed in *fale fa'apālagi*. The top picture depicts a meal being served in a *fale Sāmoa*. The lack of walls encourages Sāmoan customs of hospitality, such as calling out to passer bys to come enjoy a meal. People sit spread around the *fale* sitting on the floor level at posts, maintaining their *vā* relationships. The lower drawing depicts eating at a table in a *fale pālagi* — the wall hinders visibility between exterior and interior space — lowering awareness and acknowledgement of *vā*. Social interaction is decreased, and Sāmoan custom is not practised. Thus while the understandings about *vā* and *vā fealoaloa'i* may exist, the phenomenological experience of the *vā* has been largely disrupted. Thus the social structure of the community may be continued, but the day-to-day life and experience that supports that social structure has been greatly altered.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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