All architecture is the embodiment of cultural norms that preexist individual buildings. Vernacular traditions are characterized by a tight correlation between the understanding of these norms by designers, builders and users. Modern Western design results from the exaggeration of certain aspects within the Western vernacular tradition: namely, the wish for a will free from environmental conditions and a conglomerate aesthetic of artificiality. True vernacular tradition is based on participation, engagement, and an egalitarian political ethic. But much of the connection to these forces has been lost in modern society, and this has lead to ignorance, weakening of culture, and a decline in personal empowerment. By way of contrast, the plain form of the vernacular building represents the external image of an enduring social idea. Though the vernacular building may not be a perfect environmental solution, and though its use of detail may be inconsistent, it shows the vernacular designer to be a subtle engineer in the organization of human relations based on an established social order. Loss of vernacular tradition is usually associated with the creation of barriers to direct social interaction, compartmentalization of functions within a building, and the imposition of an external mask of symmetricality. These changes usually correspond to changes in the nature of a society, from one that is based on trust to one that is based on exploitative socio-economic relations. The study of vernacular traditions allows the architect to be more self-aware, and to be critical of his own culture’s arbitrary conventions. It also makes him a preservationist and a social activist. For the architect who understands vernacular traditions, patient field research can help heal the dislocations of modern society and reconstitute some of the shared basis for design that marked vernacular traditions.

Buildings, like poems and rituals, realize culture. Architects rationalize their actions differently. One will say he designs and builds as he does because that is the way of his people, and to do otherwise would be wrong. Another will argue that his professional practice correctly manifests
scientific and universal laws of architecture. Both create entirely from within the smallness of their own experience.

All architects are born into architectural environments that condition their sense of beauty and social comfort. Before they have been burdened with knowledge about architecture, their minds inquire into the wholeness of their senses, and they associate accumulated scraps of experience without regard to the segregation of facts by logical class. Thick white paint layered on rough pine boards comes to connote home and call to mind the smells of old men, the sounds of bacon frying, the feel of linoleum on the kitchen floor. Memory grows wild, and the builder’s mind expands, un-directed by future projects, unchecked by useful categories. When the builder’s attention is narrowed by training, whether in the dusty shop of the master carpenter or in the sleek classroom of the university, past experience is not obliterated, and his education — the applied structure of admonition and precept — effortlessly incarnates in pedagogical technique (if not in content) the culture’s basic values. Despite the rigors of training, the builder remains a confused, full person, and when it comes time to act, his creation seems proper because it orders and incorporates the accumulated experience he shares with his fellows who do not build. The architect’s product feels right because it integrates the architect’s professional, conscious and unconscious being. The overtly architectural contrivance covertly embodies the norms of beauty, social order, and the political propriety with which the architect as a person has learned to feel at ease.

As a cultural fact, architecture is like any realization of potential, like any projection of learned ideas. The things of the world — this sentence, that palace — preexisted themselves in the mind as plans derived from memory, and so they can be reversed in analysis. Things become plans, plans become sets of decisions, decisions arise of intention. All things embody their creators and become for the period of their existence active images of their creators’ wishes. In this, buildings are like other cultural things, and there are no
differences among kinds of building. Vernacular, non-ver­
nacular, neo-vernacular — all are cultural ways to create,
orderings of experience, like poems, like rituals (FIG. 1).

MATERIALIZATION

As a cultural activity, architecture is conceptual, a matter of
shaping memory into plans, plans into things that can be
sensed by other people. Architecture is, thus, a variety of
communication. The mode of its thinking connects archi­
tecture to all culture, but the mode of its realization distin­
guishes it radically from other types of communication. To
be architecture, an idea must first be realized in materials.
Materialization raises complexities not met in verbal
communication. Materials limit concepts. Just as every
building records intentions, so does it record situation, the
resources in the scene that curtail intentions and make all
buildings compromises between will and circumstance.

The decision to create a building is the decision to destroy
some part of the material universe. Things are destroyed —
trees are felled, stone is broken, old homes are razed — to
make things better. The attempt to improve by destruction
is technological. Every technological act entails changes in
two major relations: one between the human and the nonhu­
man world, another within the world of people (FIG. 2).

![FIG. 2. Local materials: Farm, Ore parish, Dalarna, Sweden.](image)

Technology requires sacrifice of extant materials that ulti­
mately do not owe their presence to human beings, and so
technology — the means of transforming the natural into
the cultural — exists as an index of a culture’s valuation of
nature. Nature can be valued as an active or a passive
resource. Among the people I have studied at first hand,²
the latter is the case (and it must be remembered what a
curious leap of the imagination this is, for people are, after
all, part of the natural world from which they are capable of
conceptually separating themselves). Vernacular tech­
nologies involve local materials — green oak, damp clay —
and the direct touch of the hand. Non-vernacular technolo­
gies, supported by intricate systems of transportation and
lavish industrial techniques, need not utilize the locality or
display the marks of the hand tool. But the attitude toward
the nonhuman world is, in essence, the same. Nature is
erased. The towering oak is dropped and dressed into
lumber before it is joined into a frame. Clay is dug and
stirred and shaped and dried into bricks before it is laid into
walls. Wood and masonry techniques both involve a
middle step — the hewn timber, the burned brick — in
which nature is left behind and the human world is entered.
Subsequent steps lead to the existence of new man-made
entities. Finally, natural colors are hidden and form is
unified beneath a coat of paint, usually bright white, which
cracks the new creation away from nature and sets it forth
as a purely human product, a clear emblem of superiority,
of mastery over circumstance. The Western technology
called “modern” is much less a violation of the vernacular
than it is an exaggeration of one impulse within the ver­
nacular: the wish to free will from environmental condi­
tions, the intention to set the human being righteously in the
role of exploiter.

There is a difference, however, between the vernacular and
the exaggeration of it that is modern technology. When the
environment mastered man and man fought back with plow
and axe, the act of struggling against nature with all one’s
power was courageous. When man sits coddled in a
temperature-controlled office forty stories above a city, the
relentless continuation of that ancient struggle seems heart­
less. The fact of continuation remains. It is traditional —
cultural, vernacular, natural — for the Western designer to
think upon nature as a means to materialize plans contrived
in the freedom of his head. This attitude is exhibited most
clearly in an aesthetic of artificiality, of traditional taste for
repetitive identical units — brick, for instance — and
smooth, machined surfaces, such as planed boards, shaved
chins, and the slick fenders of automobiles. But, despite
tradition, experience has been disrupted. Nature conquered
nonchalantly at a distance is not like nature conquered face
on. The hewn timber and the steel beam both display the
aesthetic of artificiality — but the tree I topple and plane to
smoothness is my victory because I have known its transformation in my hands and fingers, while the steel beam mined and milled by another and buried somewhere in the concrete beneath me is so removed from my experience as to hold no message for my mind.

The house carved out of the forest contains the narrative of the battle. It teaches its occupants continually about their position in the universe and surrounds them with a sense of their capabilities. From it they learn the validity of their culture. As artificiality spins to extremes, the walls around people come to contain no reminder of natural origins or human endeavor; they allow no penetration of sunlight or breeze or shifts of heat. The poetic dimension of technology dissolves. People lose the capacity to connect themselves (agonistically perhaps) to the world they inhabit, and so surrender the right to know what they know. They are comfortable, their bodies are well cared for, but there is nothing around them for the mind to work upon in its quest for wisdom. Every change becomes a surprise, a source of disorientation, desperation, petty fears. As experience diminishes, the culture formulated out of experience grows weak. People become unsure of their own abilities and lose the inward capacity to resist that which lies beyond. Protected, they are vulnerable.

Technology represents more than the means to accomplish designs. Since technology is disruptive intervention in the universe, it cannot be carried out unless profound moral questions are first provided with simple answers. From these answers the right to claim and alter the world proceeds. Since altered materials must be assembled by people, technology further demands that political questions be provided simple answers so that labor can be organized. Technology is thus doubly cultural; it unfolds from theories about man’s position in the universe and from theories about relations of power among men (FIG. 3).

In the ideal vernacular, divisions in architectural work — design, construction and use — are brought into unity in a single individual. The man who wants to shelter his cows plans a barn, cuts down some trees, chops them into lumber, splits shingles and pins, and builds the barn he uses. The barn is wholly his fault. In the traditions I have studied, these roles — design, construction and use — are not normally filled by the same person, but are taken over by specialists. Nevertheless, the differentiation implicit in specialization is overarched by an experience of participation and an egalitarian ethic. A man wants a house. He talks with a builder. Together they design the house out of their shared experience, their culture of what a house should be. There is no need for formal plans. Students of vernacular architecture search for plans, wish for plans, but should not be surprised that they find none. The existence of plans is an indicator of cultural weakening. The amount of detail in a plan is an exact measure of the degree of cultural disharmony; the more minimal the plan, the more completely the architectural idea abides in the separate minds of architect and client. Once their pact is made, the client prepares the materials and the architect directs the erection of the house, performing the most difficult technological tasks himself while the client serves as one of the laborers. The job is done and the laborer becomes occupant, using the home as he will, sitting tonight in a building he helped raise, which stands around him as proof of his ability to accomplish his desires.

Actions among people building a home naturally shape in accordance with the political norms of the culture. Vernacular politics are egalitarian. This does not mean that all the actors in a political event are the same, or that they are equal. It means their diversity interlocks, their special talents and needs combine for mutual benefit. Mutuality usually comes of direct, joint participation. The user helps design. The designer builds. The result of participation is understanding. The laborer understands his design. The designer understands the needs of the user. The result of understanding is an egalitarian ethic that confines individualistic urges. Understanding the craft of the laborer, the user does not request fantastic shapes or risky operations, even though he might nurture wishes for an exotic or lofty domicile. Understanding the needs of the user, the designer does not argue for a novel option, though it could bring him more profit. Design, construction and use merge in an efficiently designed, solidly constructed, wholly useful — largely conventional — product.

Since the egalitarian ethic accepts specialization and varying degrees of talent, change can occur subtly. Specialization can increase without stress to the social fabric: the designer can cease to build, the mason can hire a carpenter, the carpenter can become a joiner and hire a man to nail the boards together. But if specialization increases past the point of mutual understanding, the political order is poised for disruption. When the designer plans a house for someone he does not know but in which he, the designer,
would wish to live, the participatory base of the vernacular is lost, although its egalitarian ethic remains.

But here we have reached the breaking point, the dividing line between vernacular and non-vernacular action, for the egalitarian spirit finds survival hard outside participatory scenes. New political orders, generous perhaps, even democratic in tone, begin to rise, and with them come the

The political structure has become one of dominance and submission. The architectural product is no longer vernacular. It has been produced by a society within which relations among people are not egalitarian, but exploitative.

Modern Western technology is a hyperbolic extension of certain features of Western vernacular. It carries the old ideas of artificiality and craft specialization to extremes.

evils that breed ignorance. When the designer plans for someone he does not know a dwelling that he, the designer, would be unwilling to inhabit, or when the laborer is asked to create an element for a whole that he does not understand, or when the user is asked to select from among a series of objects none of which suit his needs, then the egalitarian ethic has vanished along with participatory experience.

The person familiar with the Western vernacular does not, therefore, find the new technology altogether alien. A person from outside the West might embrace modern technology as wholly good or reject it as wholly bad, but the traditional Western builder feels at once comfortable and confused. The smooth sheetrocked walls, linoleum floors, and metal roof of the modern country home are welcomed.

FIG. 3. Working Together: Sawing timbers for house construction, Kagajipara village, Dhamrai, Bangladesh.
as perfections of the old wish for artificiality. Clean, repetitive concrete blocks have been gracefully incorporated into vernacular traditions on both sides of the Atlantic to replace clean, repetitive bricks and boards. Yet, the very man who praises his metal roof for its convenience, damns it for its demands. The thatched or shingled roof of the bad old days required hard and frequent hand work, but it could be laid on without cash, and it came of his own proud effort. The compartmentalization of labor is comprehensible as efficient on the basis of traditional divisions within the crafts of the past, and new kinds of labor are welcomed as productive of the cash necessary to purchase the metal roofs and electrical gadgets that spell the consumer’s success. Yet, the very man who speaks with approval of his metal roof and power saw laments the passing of convivial, collective modes of working (FIG. 4). Constantly I am told that the great gain in comfort has been offset by the great loss in security of mutual endeavor, that the great gain in cash has been offset by the great loss in the little joys once found amid necessary toil.

The key to vernacular technology is engagement, direct involvement in the manipulation of materials (even when the goal is artificiality) and active participation in the process of design, construction and use (even if the social organization of architectural creation includes high levels of specialization). The product of engagement is knowledge. As technologies evolve toward indirect techniques for the manipulation of materials, toward the isolation of segments of the creative process, the major loss is the experience of engagement that produces awareness of the connectedness that enables people to evaluate their situation in the world, and thus be ambivalent about historical change.

SHELTERING

As a concept rendered into the world technologically, architecture is like any artifact. All artifacts are double in nature, simultaneously ends and means. Ends in themselves, artifacts are aesthetic, realizations of ideas that excite the senses. Means to other ends, artifacts are tools, aids to human purpose. What distinguishes architectural objects from other artifacts is their capacity to provide two perspectives on the double identity of the artifact. Like any artifact, architecture can be sensed from without. But only architecture can also be entered and sensed from within.

From the external perspective, as objects for the eye of a distanced beholder, vernacular buildings appear first as works of art, as arrangements of volume and void and color, as sculpture. Architectural art, in the traditions I have studied, is invested but minimally with decorative detail. Ornaments are on a modest scale, simple in shape, weak in reference, and they are shoved to the edges where they deflect attention from themselves and emphasize the overall form of the building. Confined to the margins, reduced from power in size and by location, details shift frequently.
over time in vague agreement with changes of style in distant centers. Such use of details indicates clearly that the creator was aware of urbane fashion, and that while he did not reject it, he chose to hold it firmly in check, making fashion subordinate to the basic formal idea. This basic idea changes so rarely that changes in it must be read as evidence of cultural reorganization, and its stability must be read as expressive of deep cultural desire.

The plain, uncluttered form of the vernacular building is the artful external presentation of an internal idea. The aesthetic of the vernacular building is not ornate but logical. It approximates prose more than poetry. As fine prose becomes transparent to let its ideas shine through (in contrast to poetry, in which words draw attention to themselves), so the facade of a vernacular building offers little excitement or resistance yet always enables the viewer to predict with some assurances the plan within.

The eye is pulled by the building’s appearance into its plan, into its use. The student of vernacular architecture is drawn past the sculptural exterior to the working interior. Though some scholars reduce architecture to flat pictures of facades, the vernacular emphasizes that the most important dimensions of buildings lie inside. The experience of the interior makes some artifacts into architecture and brings the student into confrontation with architecture’s main reason for being: the provision of internal spaces to shelter people and help them order social occasions (FIGS. 6, 7).

Just as modern technologies have exaggerated the tendencies of the artificial within the Western vernacular while ignoring the equally important egalitarian social aspects of traditional craft, so non-vernacular theories of architectural purpose stress the sheltering functions of buildings, their capacity to create artificial environments, while undervaluing buildings’ social goals. “Progress” is effected by breaking the old tradition down, focusing on some of its virtues (those by which advancement can be most easily measured), then forging ahead with the pretense that only these virtues matter, while other virtues drift from attention. These other virtues are the most difficult to assess, because they lead clearly away from the material world into social values, and so to complex, finally unresolvable problems (FIG. 8).

Buildings must offer both protection from the elements and stages for social play, but the evidence in the vernacular tra-
ditions that I know — and I remind the reader that none of these developed in extreme climates — is that environmental modification is of less importance than social organization in shaping homes. The old houses of the Irish community I studied form around one large central space called a kitchen. This room expands through the full depth of the house, lifts to the ridge of the roof, and is entered directly from outside. One end of the kitchen is warmed and lit by a small fire. Other rooms are low, dark, lacking a source of heat. When I asked in the summer, I was told that it never gets cold in Ireland. When I asked in the winter, while winds pounded at the house, I was told that the cold would not last. But the cold does last, and for much of the year the house is, simply, too cold for comfort. This is because the primary goal of the house is not environmental, but social. The house is designed to remain open to neighbors, to be exposed to all outsiders, so that its inhabitants can answer a sacred commandment to hospitality. The soul’s duty is more important than the body’s comfort, and the house is designed primarily to bring people into intimate interaction, and only secondarily to protect them from the mutable weather. In eighteenth-century America, houses in the coldest and warmest parts of the Atlantic seaboard underwent dramatic changes that left them less efficient environmentally. Their designers had not gone crazy. They had chosen to make them more efficient in the social sphere, and that decision necessitated a decrease in efficiency in another domain of design. The central hearth around which low rooms tightly clustered in icy New England gave way to a central, unheated hallway that admitted cold blasts in the winter, but permitted a more polite internal organization of behavior. The houses of the hot, humid Deep South were originally a single room in depth so that breezes could flow from window to window through all the rooms. Then a second rank of rooms was ordered behind the first, stultifying welcome winds but providing a series of spaces into which social activities could be divided for cleanliness and privacy. It is as though in the whole complexity of the building, nature were conquered in technology, in the manipulation of trees into roofs and the smooth surfaces of walls, and the people within the home learned to live with the mild bodily discomfort produced by climatic variation in order to make their dwelling a clearer symbol of their aspirations for social order.

When the student focuses on decorative detail, as the architectural historian often does, vernacular architecture displays steady changes in response to shifts in upper class taste, but most of the building remains out of focus and out of account. The conservative scholar desperately wishes to demonstrate that the common people align quiescently behind distant leaders, but this attitude steals integrity and power from the people’s own culture. If the student’s

\[\text{FIG. 9. (bottom) The Old Irish House: With one window per room, one door and one chimney, the house front beckons the visitor into warmth; County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland.}\]

\[\text{FIG. 10. (top) The New Irish House: The symmetrical facade baffles entry; County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland.}\]
external view takes in the whole building, then its deviation from fashion and adherence to the local tradition come to dominate its concept, the builder is granted his human freedom of choice, and the overall form of the building’s exterior leads the mind to its internal arrangements. If those arrangements are read as designed primarily to defend people from the climate, then the vernacular builder is revealed as not too clever and as shifting whimsically from more to less effective responses to his conditions. But if the internal arrangements are understood in social terms, the vernacular architect is discovered to be a subtle and sensitive engineer. His design makes sense, and changes in his plans follow an orderly course; the most important dimensions of vernacular culture are grasped and become challenges to our own ideas of architectural order. Buildings contain people. They can shelter people, but they must organize human relations. Most deeply vernacular homes are social facts; their primary order is ethical (FIGS. 9, 10, 11, 12).

Of all the changes I have found in my study of vernacular architecture, the most important are social. The old house is open. No barrier blocks the entrance. Outsiders pierce effortlessly through one door to the very center of the home. The interior is composed of a few large, multifunctional spaces. Entertainment and cooking happen together and people sleep together. The plan of the house grows from human activities, and the nonsymmetrical facade grows from the plan, so that people approaching the house know where the people of the interior are. Outsiders can easily imagine their way through the walls into the lives of the inhabitants. Such a house is based on trust. That is the word I was given in Ireland. The essence of trust, I was told, is confidence. The people inside are confident that the people approaching will bring within them the basic rules of proper social exchange. The job of the house is to let them in. The job of the people is to act correctly and they can be trusted to do so. Things change: the new house is closed. A barrier appears. A porch, vestibule, lobby or hallway blocks entrance to the home. Visitors are halted in a social lock before they gain admission to the home’s social center. The interior fragments into small compartments. There is one room for cooking, another for entertainment. Servants or women are removed from the house’s sociable arena; labor separates from leisure. Chambers multiply, separating sleepers, categorizing the family into subclasses. Then a geometrically symmetrical mask is drawn across the house’s facade, so, though the visitor can still predict the plan, he does not know where the people are within the home. He approaches without certainty, is stopped in a vestibule, and then is led into a domestic place stripped of the clutter of daily work. Such a house assumes the potential for social disorder. It is shaped on distrust and defends against...
confusion through the rational arrangement of small, monofunctional cells within which behavior is contained with clarity.

I have studied this change from the open and nonsymmetrical to the closed and symmetrical in the United States and in Ireland. Others have described comparable changes in England, Denmark and Turkey. This architectural change happens at different times in different places to mark a crucial stage in cultural evolution. Houses change in intelligent response to a shift in social order, from an order that unfolds out of a thick, face-to-face, neighborly experience to one that is imposed to compensate for the lack of that experience. The new house proposes a rational order out of a loss of confidence in the inherent order of social interaction. The change from old to new follows upon an economic change during which the egalitarian, cooperative mode of work, founded on sacred commandment, is traded for an hierarchical, competitive mode of work founded on secular law and rules of decorous behavior. The newly competitive worker reads a frightening lesson out of his own ambitions, and constructs a house that defends his family against intrusion from others who might carry the selfishness he feels in himself — a house that proposes in its rational order an honorable truce between people separately pursuing their personal happiness. The change occurs in response to a change in the socio-economic world and in advance of a change in the political world, where legal reform, armed revolution, and new constitutions belatedly codify the social and economic shifts previously announced in architectural plans. The message to the architect is that houses are cultural, that they are profoundly matters of social order. Since social order cannot be disjoined from economic aspiration and ideas of the sacred, then houses cannot be understood outside of their economic, political and religious contexts, outside of their reality as cultural creations.

STUDY

Vernacular architecture records subtly but insistently the history of a people. The shift from communal to individualistic enterprise, from self-sufficiency to dependence; the gain in control over nature, accompanied by a loss of personal involvement in creation; the gain of convenience, accompanied by the loss of pleasure in work; the gain in bodily comfort, accompanied by a loss of confidence in the social order — all can be understood by an investigation of houses in large numbers. Vernacular architecture is a great resource for the scholar who wishes to write a more scientific and democratic history, and thus provide his readers with a means for understanding their present estate. At the same time, the study of vernacular architecture holds practical implications for the future.

The careful, patient and passive study of diverse traditions of architectural practice reveals that all architectural theories are cultural. All entail actions beyond design and construction. Every architectural tradition is also a tradition of attitudes toward nature (and therefore a teleology). Having learned this, we can return to our own architectural tradition to comprehend more completely its complexity, its cultural base, its ultimate arbitrariness. When we chance to think of technology as nonpolitical or define houses as shelter or speak of the human need for privacy, we will know that we are talking not of universal principles, of truth, but only of conventions appropriate to an unusual culture that accepts class distinctions as the natural result of inherent differences among people, that dismisses concern for nature in itself as primitive animism, sentimental romanticism, or unrealistic environmentalism, that approves of self-centered activities, even among adults. Strange notions feel natural and get proposed as human universals, because we, like all people, are cultural beings.

Understanding that modern Western architecture is but one of the world’s many traditions of design, having learned the arbitrariness of our own ways, we can question our own motives. From close study of vernacular architecture, we know that when we say, “It is human nature to be competitive, to fight for survival, to seek personal happiness,” we are really saying, “It is the nature of bourgeois intellectuals in the capitalist West to believe that it is human nature to be competitive, to fight for survival, to seek personal happiness.” This self-awareness, which can come only from careful inquiry into other traditions, forces us to analyze our own culture, scraping its presuppositions into view, dismantling its structure of proposition, preparing it for real change and genuine improvement. Serious study is a positive revolutionary force (FIG. 13).

The study of other architectural traditions simultaneously causes us to criticize our conventions and learn respect for the conventions of others. Other architectural traditions will cease to be strange and quaint and unimportant; they will rise in our minds as coherent and reasonable. We will
become unwilling to disturb them and will decide to protect them against members of our society who do not understand them and are willing, even anxious, to sweep them away. This attitude of protection will extend to dead as well as living cultures.

Expansion and intensification of historic preservation is one goal of the student of vernacular architecture. In the United States people from different social backgrounds and of diverse political persuasion are gathering with increasing excitement to protect the built environment against witless destruction. The task of the scholar and practitioner of architecture is to join and help lead, teaching comrades in this good cause about the cultures that created the buildings and landscapes they are fighting to preserve, directing attention to architectural works that are worthy of preservation but which — because of class or racial bias — have not yet gained the full approval of the preservation movement.

Enthusiasm for past architectural traditions is not matched by enthusiasm for live architectural traditions. It is not hard to imagine a redirection of the preservationist’s energies toward creation of a hedge of sentiment and legal code around vital traditions, like that now protecting historical spaces. Wherever a vernacular tradition flourishes, where design, building and use remain unified by an egalitarian ethic, where people continue to shape their own destinies architecturally — there the preservationist and scholar should work to defend people against planners intent on preventing people from doing what they want to. What they want to do may grate on the educated sensibility, may run counter to legal codes designed to protect the elite, may disturb some notions of proper decorum. But if it is their choice, it is their right, and our responsibility should be to protect their right to create as their culture suggests they should.

When facing vernacular architecture, the architect’s role is confined to protection. Architects must learn to preserve the surviving creations of dead cultures, securing them against decay so they can carry their messages into the future and help people in days to come make better buildings. Architects must learn to refrain from fraudulent restoration and learn to expand their appreciation past masterworks of architectural history courses, helping to save for the future the architectural diversity of the past in a stable, sturdy, usable form, unconfused by unnecessary alterations or fantastic efforts to achieve some pure early version of a building. A building's reality consists of the changes it has undergone as much as its original state. Its fabric is the rich record of those changes, and to strip changes away is to destroy historical data and assault the building’s historical being. More important, and much more difficult given architectural education, is the architect’s responsibility to help preserve continuing vernacular traditions, aiding people in their effort to maintain freedom of action. Upon discovering a community that designs and builds for itself according to its own ideals, the architect should not join with capitalists and planners in the effort to undermine the community so that its members can be shoved into isolation and sold unuseful, unnecessary commodities. The architect's role is to learn from those people so as to improve his own practice and make it more sensitive to human needs. Once he has learned from the people of the community, he will be conversant with two distinct architectural traditions and so be able to serve as a
cultural middle-man. He can teach the people of the community about members of his own society who want to use them basely as laborers and consumers of shoddy products, and he can work within his own society to protect vernacular traditions against attack.

Understanding the validity of the vernacular creates new jobs for the architect, jobs that must be mastered if the future is to be better than the past. These jobs do not involve designing, leveling the ground, raising wondrous new piles; they involve the difficult task of learning to appreciate unappreciated architectural traditions and then working to save them: working to stabilize old structures against decline, working to protect architects without university training so that they can continue to practice. The study of the vernacular will make the architect a preservationist and a social activist. Plenty of occasions will remain for the architect to design and build. These will follow disruption and dislocation. Neighborhoods will be transformed as their people choose to adopt new patterns of life. The architect’s role cannot be to prevent people from choosing change, any more than it can be to force people to change. The architect’s role is to allow choice. People will choose personal comfort over environmental engagement, individualistic over collective social arrangements. The architect should do no more than help them select with awareness, then help them adapt to the consequences of their decisions.

Rural and urban neighborhoods will be transformed, buildings will decay past possible renewal, people will move, populations will increase. New buildings will be required, and architects will plan them. The architect attuned to the vernacular will strive to let the people for whom he is designing participate in the process of construction. This will not often be possible, and it may not be desired by the people. But in most cases it will be possible (despite false arguments to the contrary) to have the user help design, to let people in on decisions concerning room size and arrangement. When that is not possible, there is still no excuse to design without attention to the varieties of human need. Some people need privacy, others need social intensity. One design cannot serve them both.

Consider a simple American instance. In the rural southern United States the idea of the home characteristically includes an external social space, a wide porch or shady yard where encounter is casual and informal and continual. If these Southern people, most conspicuously Black people, are packed into high-rise apartment buildings, designed so that they include private cubicles but no places for casual gathering, the people will correctly rebel against the building, forcing it to decay rapidly, making it an unpleasant, alienated scene. But when the same people move into late-Victorian houses in formerly bourgeois white neighborhoods where houses are supplied with deep front porches and where the shady streets provide places to gather, the people lavish affection on their houses and recreate the easy feel of a rural community within a thoroughly urban setting. Before he designs, the architect must study so that his design will answer the needs and incorporate the vernacular values of the people who must use the building he creates.

The architect’s research replaces the shared experiences that made the vernacular architect’s product meet its user’s needs. The architect who has studied the vernacular will not create a building that imitates the appearance of some old building. Study of the vernacular shows that materials change easily, that superficial details shift often, that what matters most is the basic plan, the ordering of rooms in which domestic life transpires. So the new building can employ the latest technology, and it can — and probably should — present an up-to-date front, but it will still do its work well if it is arranged internally to allow people to continue on their way without disruption. No person is able to articulate every detail of what the proper arrangement for his or her home would be. The right order of a home is created out of study. Serious study is not a matter of accumulating questionnaires or photographs, but of accumulating experience through participation. From experiences shared with the people for whom he is designing, from nights passed and drinks drunk with them, the architect becomes in his imagination the vernacular architect who created perfectly for his clients.

Study of the vernacular produces knowledge that all architecture is cultural, that all cultures differ in structuring their hierarchy of values. All buildings must be designed with specific cultures in mind. What is right for us is not necessarily right for another culture. This simple proposition complicates architectural practice. After it is grasped, architectural practice can never again be the same. All architectural practice must be preceded by intense field study among the people for whom the architect plans to build, from whom he has stolen the right to design.
REFERENCE NOTES

This paper owes its origin to two keynote addresses I have given, one at the 1988 “Traditional Dwellings and Settlements” conference at the University of California, Berkeley and the other at the 1982 “Vernacular and Neo-vernacular Architecture” conference held at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. A different version of this paper was first printed under the title “Vernacular and Neo-vernacular Architecture and Society” in Material Culture Vol. 16 no. 1 (1984), pp. 5-24.

The comments in this paper do not exist as propositions within a totalizing theory of architecture. Instead, they offer some conclusions I have reached during field study of real buildings, directed by a theory of culture largely shaped by American anthropologists and by the mode of interpretation best called structuralism. My greatest debts are to the humanistic geography practiced by Fred Kniffen and E. Estyn Evans; to the historical analysis of architecture undertaken by James Marston Fitch; to the tradition of my discipline, folklore, in which anthropological ideas are applied to the study of human creativity; and to the kind, generous, and intelligent people who have taken me in and taught me about their homes. My major experience has been in the southern United States and in Ireland. Since writing this paper I have been able to conduct research in Turkey and Bangladesh. That research does not radically alter the propositions of this essay (in many ways it is reinforcing). But the paper represents thinking developed in relation to architectural facts in the United States and the British Isles; my conclusions cannot pretend to universality, and their utility lies more in analogy than applicability.


All photos by author unless otherwise noted.