The young field of vernacular landscape studies suffers from limitations imposed by its fundamental categories, which in turn grow out of the field's roots in Western intellectual and aesthetic concepts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This paper analyzes two of those fundamental categories. The first is the present concept of tradition, which sets off the vernacular as a static category of experience distinct from that of contemporary society and characterized by a series of insider/outside dichotomies. The second is a belief in the authenticity of the object as a sign of its maker, which obscures the multiplicity of experiences and meanings that any artifact can obtain. Future studies of the vernacular need to concentrate on landscapes of slippage and discontinuity more than on those of permanence and integrity valued in studies of tradition.

As students of traditional architecture and settlements, we do what we do pretty well. We know the words and the music; we have the steps down. Yet anyone who reads much of our work must feel a certain sense of familiarity. It may seem odd to say this about a field that is still relatively new, that lacks an extensive bibliography of first-rate works, and that is, with conspicuous exceptions, not very sophisticated in its approach. Obviously there is much basic fieldwork to be done, many parts of the world's vernacular landscape that we have not yet examined. Nevertheless, it is impossible to avoid thinking that our act is already too established, too pat, that there is more we can or should be doing.

This paper has more to do with voicing doubts than with floating theories or manifestos. Its particular mission is to examine unwritten assumptions that frame current vernacular studies. Although scholars of the traditional environ-
ments of the so-called First and Third Worlds work to all intents and purposes ignorant of one another, it seems to me that there are important similarities in the intellectual underpinnings of the two camps, as well as comparable limitations in their approaches. Both sides base their work on concepts of tradition and the vernacular that spring from the same sources in European intellectual history, that are static and dualistic in their conception, and that are grounded in an elusive faith in the object as authentic sign of its maker.

So my second aim, in addition to scrutinizing these assumptions and the work that arises from them, is to consider what more positive common ground First and Third World scholars might have. Although my comments are based primarily on studies of North America and Western Europe, I believe that all scholars of the vernacular share in their purview and methods certain common possibilities for intersection and productive cross-fertilization that transcend either region or the categories of tradition and the vernacular.

THE CONCEPT OF THE VERNACULAR

Why are we drawn to study the vernacular? Most of the literature, however scholarly, has an undertone of enthusiasm. We are emotionally attracted to the vernacular by its aesthetic variety, its independent, self-help production, its putative egalitarianism, or its adaptation to its surroundings — all qualities that we find lacking in whatever we define as the nonvernacular environment. These attitudes have roots that predate the invention of the categories of traditional and vernacular. Knowing something about their origins helps us understand the assumptions behind our endeavors.

From the point of view of the built landscape, it is useful to start in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with artistic and antiquarian celebration of irregularity and difference in the European landscape. This was part of the familiar introduction of relativistic values into Western thought that historians have chronicled so thoroughly. Those values affirmed the legitimacy of difference across time and space and stimulated the development of a sense of history as a circumstantial and noncyclical phenomenon.²

This is a familiar story. It is relevant here because the aesthetic and intellectual principles of picturesque exoticism were the immediate impulses for the Western study of traditional architecture. A direct intellectual progression leads from the first architectural investigation of classical ruins that were judged picturesque because they were irregular (meaning that they departed from the absolute rules of classical aesthetics through decay or the effects of time), to the study, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, of the unclassical forms of medieval high architecture. These were irregular or picturesque in the sense that their original designs, which incorporated classically derived elements, violated established aesthetic rules. From there we move, by the mid-nineteenth century, to the appreciation of nonclassical, nonmonumental, often nonmedieval forms, all grouped under the rubric of the “Gothic.” These were irregular because, in the eyes of the first scholars of the vernacular, they were built wholly outside the tradition of classicism.

The intellectual passage from classical ruins to medieval monuments to rural houses was too intricate to trace here in detail. In one sense it is unnecessary to do so, because the connections were based on elision and analogy rather than on analytical reasoning, and along the way they bogged down in questions of national identity and cultural character. We only need to recognize that by about 1875 there was a place for rural, nonmonumental, presumably preindustrial buildings within a distinctive social-cultural space labeled “traditional” or “vernacular.” This space lay outside established aesthetic rules and was consequently available as a platform from which to evade and criticize them. The first detailed studies of this newly invented vernacular space were made by people like Ralph Nevill in England and Norman Morrison Isham and Henry Chapman Mercer in the United States. All were committed to the values of the arts and crafts movement, many were architects, and all presented their works as explicit appreciations of the superiority of tradition, and as reformist in intent. Mercer, for example, opened an art pottery based on techniques he claimed to have learned from traditional Pennsylvania German potters. Isham dedicated his first two books to the craftsmen of Connecticut and Rhode Island, respectively. And Nevill offered his similar work as a collection of hints to contemporary architects frustrated by the aesthetic corruption of current architectural practice.

INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

This intellectual and aesthetic history is relevant in a second way, because it shaped our definition of vernacular social-cultural space. If the acknowledgment of difference promoted a circumstantial view of history, it also reinforced the dualistic views of us and them that permeate Western philosophy and theology. This dualism manifested itself in one way as an interest in outsiders, as the West pushed outward beginning at the end of the Middle Ages, and in another as a complementary engagement with difference within — a fascination with obscure, little-known, seemingly exotic segments of Western societies.
This view was dichotomous in another sense, in that the exploration of others had both positive and negative implications. Sometimes us and them have been framed in terms of the moral and cultural superiority. The distinction might emphasize the superiority of us here to them there, whether “they” refers to Irish, Africans, Americans, Asians, or Pacific Islanders. It might equally aptly demonstrate the superiority of us to our neighbors within: of the respectable to what the eighteenth century would have called the mob; of the urbane to the oaf and the bumpkin; of the moderate to the over- and the underachiever; of the open to the secret. Yet at other times dichotomy has engendered envy, excitement and titillation at the picturesque ness of the underworld or the colorfulness of the peasant. More often, it reinforced a nostalgic sense of inferiority and loss and consequent unfavorable comparison of ourselves with the noble savages and sturdy yeomen of other places and times. Although this nostalgic self-flagellation is an old tradition, as Raymond Williams showed, it took on new force and generality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the range of human experience became apparent to Westerners.

Moreover, these dichotomies carried a heavy freight of moral and cultural authenticity, one that demanded clear distinctions of the true religion from infidelity or superstition, of order from anarchy, of liberty from oppression, of the straightforward from the sophisticated, of the primitive from the decadent, of the civilized from the savage. At bottom lay an assertion of one-sided connections with the sources of truth, consigning the complement to falsehood or illusion.

The concept of the vernacular was and still is permeated with these dichotomies and with both negative and positive readings of difference. Consider the qualities that are said to characterize the vernacular: all depend explicitly or implicitly on insider-outsider distinctions.

First, the vernacular is often described in terms of community or personal connections. Those who are outside our own experience are credited with being in fact insiders, with a cohesive experience that is more authentic than our own. The vernacular is the space of true community as opposed to the fragmented or isolated spaces of contemporary life. This assumption can be detected in the common assertion that the patterns or similarities among traditional buildings represent the shared values of a little community. Either out of respect for one’s neighbors, out of fear of censure, or from lack of need for visible assertion of status, vernacular builders all tend to build about the same thing. With the rise of economic competition and social differentiation, of alienation from the old community, the consensus of traditional architecture is shattered. The vernacular thus represents enduring values, as opposed to our own realm, which is characterized by transience.

There is a subtext in these dichotomies of what theologians call pre- and post-lapsarianism, of life before and after the Fall. Euro-American vernacular studies routinely apotheosize the preindustrial golden age. Like sin, the outside is irresistibly intrusive, and with it comes the contamination and defeat of tradition. This subtext is explicitly articulated by the English, who insist that there was no vernacular architecture after 1700, when national transportation systems and architectural publications sowed the knowledge fatal to innocence in the countryside. Among most North Americans, it is more implicit. We concentrate on rural, preindustrial buildings as a matter of taste rather than ideology, but it is a taste formed by the tradition of picturesque antiquarianism.

My point is that these hoary predispositions direct our choices of what to study as well as the questions we ask and the answers we give. In recent years the domain of North American vernacular architecture studies, formerly closely restricted to old rural houses, has been enlarged, but it has yet to produce new paradigms or definitions. Rather, established boundaries have been stretched and twisted in a kind of hip intellectual game whose object is to make a case for the most unlikely candidates for the traditional, rather than to challenge the category itself.

Second, outsider/insider dichotomies also organize the social qualities ascribed to the vernacular. In this case, the operant terms are “low” and “high”: vernacular building is the culture of the populace, of the poor, just as academic or avant-garde is the culture of the elite. Some scholars argue this explicitly. Others assume it in failing to acknowledge, for example, significant socioeconomic divisions among the builders of traditional houses, or that the surviving vernacular landscapes in most places were built by members of local elites (as nearly all the colonial vernacular houses of North America were).

Third, the dichotomy of outside and inside includes a third implicit opposition, that between stability and change. The academic is intrinsically open, active, aggressive, conscious and self-conscious, and changing. The vernacular, in widely used formulations, is assumed to be untutored, uncultured and unsophisticated, its aesthetic qualities instinctive, its functional efficiencies fortuitous, its origins lost in an endless chain of imitation. Whatever is uncultured is natural; it grows out of direct communion with circumstance. The vernacular is unencumbered by artifice, and therefore authentic. The opposition, in either case, is between active and passive building traditions. The vernacular is stable; it is in this sense
that it is traditional. In Architecture Without Architects, a book that for some strange reason retains its audience and its credibility, Bernard Rudofsky says this directly:

> Vernacular architecture does not go through fashion cycles. It is nearly immutable, indeed, unimprovable, since it serves its purpose to perfection. As a rule, the origin of indigenous building forms and construction methods is lost in the past.\(^6\)

Although Rudofsky obviously views the vernacular with affection, the duality that sets the vernacular aside as a distinct category of experience has a negative aspect that is inseparable from its positive ones. If it is stable by definition, it is also, by definition, marginalized in a changing world. Its stability and passivity imply a stagnation and even deprivation against which mainstream cultural change — our ways — can be seen to advantage and judged.

To the extent that these categories draw both on common metaphors of arcadia and innocence and on equally common metaphors of stasis and privation, they have had a special appeal to architectural practitioners, for they underpin the language of expertise on which professional claims have been built. Philip Fisher once suggested that in the formative years of the architectural profession, the vernacular was invented to serve as the quackery of architecture, that is, as a false practice that served to define, by contrast, true practice.\(^7\)

In the twentieth century, the vernacular has served architects in the same way that the parallel categories of folk and primitive art served modernist artists — as an affectionately condescending term to describe design that is almost all right, that might be turned into real art in the hands of initiates. Whether sympathetically or unsympathetically cast, that is, the practitioner’s interest in the vernacular is often a vested one. It boils down to the following questions: Where can architects get jobs? And where can they make a place for themselves in the building process?\(^8\)

These ways of characterizing the intellectual and cultural baggage that the vernacular carries are admittedly crude. They omit the subtlety and sophistication, not to mention the genuine understanding, of the best studies. Yet they are not, I think, unfair, for they illuminate the reification of the vernacular as a series of dichotomies that are as common as they are unexamined.

I have treated the vernacular as an abstract concept that was subsequently applied to the landscape, since it tends to be employed as an a priori category rather than developed empirically. Consequently, to understand what the concept of the vernacular implies, we must ask a second question: Why

Consequently, the study of the vernacular landscape is informed in obvious but also in subtle ways by the calcification of the vernacular as a discrete, pre-lapsarian arena of social experience that lies just beyond our own experience and can never be directly accessible to us. It is founded as well in the congruent belief that the landscape is an artifact integrally connected to the social realm of the vernacular, and can reveal it to us. In accepting these premises, we commit ourselves to models of the relation of the vernacular and the nonvernacular built around acculturation, contamination, and decline, models of impaired authenticity and reduced difference. Our tales are tales of woe or tales of heroic resistance (which are simply their complement). Our belief in the correspondence between the material world and its makers links our enterprise ever more firmly to a static sense of the vernacular because it encourages us to value enduring patterns of human action reified in the concept of the vernacular over the disruptions and dissociations that characterize the human landscape as built and lived.

**THE LIMITS OF AUTHENTICITY**

How heavily can we rely on our faith in the authenticity or truthfulness of the vernacular landscape? To answer that question we must break away from our cherished regard for the maker’s intentions. It is easy to argue that a certain landscape is intended to incorporate given cultural values, but it is very difficult to claim that the users see this or that they are persuaded by the artifact’s claims. It is relatively easy to make diagrams linking social or cultural and spatial practices, but it is just as easy to show that users’ interpretations belie them.

Let me offer an example from post-Revolutionary Philadelphia, the quintessential walking city. William Penn’s spacious two-square-mile gridded plan was quickly subdivided, its public squares built over and its large blocks cut through with alleys and courts. Philadelphians crowded into less than a quarter of the city’s area, as near as possible to the Delaware River waterfront. What hypotheses about the experience of the city for its residents can we draw from the artifact?
Ostensibly, the preindustrial city was characterized by a more heterogeneous pattern of land uses and less social segregation than the city after 1840. If we look at a map, noting the scale and density of development and the compression of a variety of uses and social groups into the easily traversable half square mile of the post-colonial city, we might see an intimate landscape where people were never far removed from others very different from themselves. On the other hand, if we look at the micro-orders depicted in the architecture, at the sorting within blocks and from block to block, we might incline toward an interpretation that suggests considerable social segregation.

To assess these possible models, we might look through the eyes of Elizabeth Drinker, who was the wife of one of Philadelphia's wealthiest Quaker merchants and who kept a diary spanning the forty-nine years from 1758 to 1807. The Drinkers lived in the heart of mercantile Philadelphia, in the family's combined residence and counting house on Front Street adjoining Drinker's Alley. Familiarity or segregation: which characterized Elizabeth Drinker's city?

The familiarity model suggests that in the course of her long life Drinker would come to know Philadelphia extensively and intensively. The segregation model implies that someone of her social standing would be more familiar with the affairs of her peers and with the elite institutions in the major streets than with the doings of poorer Philadelphians in the inner-block courts and alleys. In fact, neither seems to have been true of Elizabeth Drinker. Her diary records in great detail the trials and conflicts of the lower-class blacks and whites who lived in Drinker's Alley, yet it gives little indication that she had much to do with her more respectable neighbors. More strikingly, Drinker rarely left her house, particularly after an illness in the early 1790s. This hardly seems credible; our first reaction is that despite the length the diary must not be comprehensive. But then we encounter entries such as that recording her visit to a shop on Second Street behind her house, "a business that I have not been in for several years before." On another occasion she wrote that "I have not been over our door sill for upwards of nine weeks — and but twice this four months." After another walk, she noted that "I saw, for the first time, Cook's grand edifice [which stood a few hundred yards from her house and had been built three years earlier] and the New Presbyterian Meeting house . . . built within a year or two" on the same block as Cooke's building.

Elizabeth Drinker's experience of the city, which was undoubtedly an unusual one, cannot be comprehended under either of the models of intimacy or segregation. Neither can any of her family's. Drinker's husband Henry divided his time among his counting house, the Quaker meeting, and his numerous farms and extensive speculative real-estate holdings outside Philadelphia. Her son, ostensibly an invalid, explored most of the city and knew where all the low entertainments were, to his mother's chagrin. Her daughters lived largely unsupervised lives roaming about the city and suburbs with their friends. The youngest was able to plan and carry off a marriage with aid of her own and the family's friends, without her parents' ever suspecting anything was afoot.

The Drinkers' experience of Philadelphia warns us that Sam Bass Warner's memorable characterization of the pre-streetcar "walking city" can mislead us: because all parts of the city were equally accessible, it does not follow that everyone was equally familiar with all parts of it. Yet Elizabeth Drinker's example is instructive in a second way. Although she took little advantage of the walking city's potential, she knew Philadelphia well. In an era when urbanites were increasingly aware of the city as a multisensory experience, her ears were attuned to the sounds around her — to the street musicians, the disputes that took place within earshot, the cries of the watchmen, and especially the sound of the fire alarm bell. "At home in the City," she wrote, "the hour is often repeated in my ears, by the two Town-clocks, our own Clock, and the watchmen. I never was much disturbed by common noises in the night, as many are, if they were such as I could account for, and not excessively loud." Other information came to her in oral reports from her family and servants and was quickly mapped in her mental landscape. On one occasion she "was awake at and long before the dawn of day . . . thinking of my children &c. who are now planted in different parts of the City, but had the fire been near any one of them, we should undoubtedly . . . have heard of it." If the belief in the artifact as an authentic sign of its makers or users is undermined by the disparate ways that landscapes are experienced, it is also undermined by the variety of meanings makers and users invest in the same artifacts and spaces. For example, the interviews published by Jeff Gillenkirk and James Motlow in Bitter Melon, their oral history of the renowned Chinese-American agricultural town of Locke, California, reveal at least three different, overlapping landscapes sharing the same set of buildings and streets. There was the Locke that was a place of recreation and release for the male agricultural population of First Street, the quiet village of the families of Second Street (as well as the place of refuge for both), and the unorganized, "wide-open" town of the Caucasian imagination. White authorities found it convenient to treat Locke as "outside" vice laws until early in the 1930s, allowing it to be a place of a different kind of release for white and Asian society in the county.
Studies of other, more urban Chinatowns, such as those of Fresno and Stockton, California, or Vancouver, support the point.9 The spatial qualities created by real-estate development practices and urban regulations — the narrow alleys, tight quarters, and squeezing of boarding houses and hotels into the interiors of blocks — constituted imposed conditions under which the residents lived and worked, but they also offered opportunities for outsider fantasy. Chinatowns were widely supposed to have secret passages, underground chambers, and other spatial attributes that supported an incomprehensible and sinister way of life.10

It may be that the scholarly association of social structure with physical attributes, on which much of the study of traditional or vernacular environments necessarily depends, is not much different from the yellow journalist’s or the missionary’s Chinatown (although it is possibly better intended and sometimes better informed). At any rate, my examples suggest that proceeding in a positivistic manner from a belief that the landscape has some authentic connection to a discrete population is risky and can have only limited success. We may be able to demonstrate some fairly predictable aspects of social structure, but the two halves of the phrase “material culture” can never be perfectly linked.

THE TRADITION OF CHANGE

The static and essentially descriptive attention to social-spatial structure that is built into the concept of tradition has, I think, paralyzed the study of vernacular landscapes over the last several years. Because we are too interested in continuity and authenticity, we tend to ignore change and ambiguity. To remedy this, the next step in the study of the vernacular and the traditional may be to abandon those categories altogether, and with them the baggage I have described. At the least we need to contaminate the space of the vernacular and to relocate it in the human cultural landscape. We should turn our attention away from a search for the authentic, the characteristic, the enduring and the pure, and immerse ourselves in the active, the evanescent and the impure, seeking settings that are ambiguous, multiple, often contested, and examining points of contact and transformation — in the market, at the edge, in the new and the decaying. These are the places where, if not anything, at least many unexpected things can happen.

Here is an opportunity for both First and Third World studies. For obvious and pressing reasons, it seems to me that the critical story for historical and contemporary studies alike is that of the great migrations of the last five hundred years, and that of the great migrations of the last five hundred years, migrations that brought societies on their own trajectories into collision.17 Our opportunity is to study the episodes of encounter and transformation.

Current studies of vernacular landscapes and architecture tend to stress connections and continuity in a positivist way, emphasizing what used to be called the transfer of culture. That is, they study (and sometimes promote) efforts to preserve traditional culture or to reproduce old ways in new settings. We know this material well enough for the moment. Now we need to be interested in what didn’t happen, in what collapsed, in what went awry. It is in the landscapes that are up for grabs, that are not distinctive, that are not exotic, that are barely visible that the best and most important tales will be written. They are our present opportunity, and they call us to leave behind our fascination with tradition for its own sake and to study the landscape whose real tradition is change.

REFERENCE NOTES

This paper is a shortened and modified version of one delivered at the second TASTE conference, Berkeley, October, 1990.

1. I use the words traditional and vernacular interchangeably because I assume that tradition is synecdochic for vernacular. That is, the qualities that we associate with tradition in fact characterize the entire realm of the vernacular as it is currently understood.


4. Students of the vernacular assume that vernacular forms are authentic expressions of community and connections not only within the proximity of the village, but within the bonds of religion or ethnicity. Again, outsiders (from mass society) are really the true insiders;

5. For example, J.B. Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 11—55.

6. B. Rudofsky, Architecture without Architect:


10. Ibid., Vol.2 p.831 (October 11, 1796); and Vol.1 p.694 (June 24, 1795).


13. Ibid., Vol.1 p.853 (October 19, 1796).


16. It is worth noting that the same qualities were attributed to lower-class white and black districts of European and American cities by the first urban reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

17. See E.R. Wills, Europe and the People Without History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).