Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World

Reviewed by Peter Nabokov

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It is hard to imagine a more unruly and idiosyncratic passel of cultural data than that encompassing the nonpedigreed, usually owner-built shelters, homesteads, hamlets, settlements, and space-using practices produced and perpetuated since the dawn of time by anonymous, ordinary members of small-scale, rural, tribal or peasant societies. Such people have worked within the constraints of their localized, cultural traditions, employing mostly available, organic building materials to confront virtually every climatic condition on the globe. This always surprisingly inventive range of constructions (which their makers generally take for granted) has been fair picking for a host of different disciplines — architecture, art history, anthropology, sociology, folklore, psychology, natural history, etc. From theorizing about the conditions which produced humankind’s First Hut, to deciphering the jerry-rigged refugee hovels in the wake of yesterday’s political or environmental disaster, the result has been an extraordinary difficulty in establishing universally agreed-upon principles of organization and analysis.

The physically unwieldy and semiotically dense examples of material culture known as “vernacular architecture” come in every conceivable shape; they are made from every possible kind of material, raw and cooked; and they are used for every conceivable purpose. Moreover, their logic stems from tradition’s tussles with practicality on the one hand and modernity on the other, and they hide as many social, psychological and religious meanings as they reveal. They are as ancient as the hills, or they were built yesterday out of oil drums and blue plastic. Learning to “read” any single one of their traditions can consume a lifetime. How could one possibly hope to tame and separate, categorize and subdivide, contextualize and exemplify such a rampantly independent and changeably responsive range of data?

Throughout a long academic career devoted, with striking consistency, to just this task, the British scholar Paul Oliver has sought to bring the “largely unrecognized
phenomenon” of the reliance of the great majority of the world’s peoples on and attachment to these structures to academic light and respectability. As he informs us in his too-brief autobiographical preface to this monumental new work, his childhood exposure to southern England’s Wessex province, where living village traditions were interlocked with stone-walled barns and timber-framed buildings, first impressed upon him the mutually reinforcing relationships between folk life and built form. But it was his field trips within West Africa in 1964 that made him intellectually aware of “the different patterns of use, the values associated with the buildings and the means of coping with a hot, humid climate and restricted building resources.”

Oliver’s distinctive ideological commitment to the vernacular was ignited during his tenure in Ghana, as well. While teaching at Kumasi’s University of Science and Technology, he investigated the architectural impact of forced resettlement on Gurunsi and Tallensi tribespeople following construction of the Volta River dam, and he was appalled by the uncongenial, uniform prefab housing that was imposed on them. Often alone among academics, in book chapters and public lectures Oliver has insisted that the vernacular become more than a
subject for objectifying analysis. As early as 1969, in his edited anthology *Shelter and Society*, he urged that community planners “turn to vernacular communities for evidence of neighborhood character shaped by agglomeration of buildings. The broken streets, the closed vistas, the twists and turns and changes of level of an Andalusian village or shaded casbah are evidence of the inter-relationship of built forms which may go to make an integrated community.” He even wondered: “is it that there are [in the vernacular], qualities here to which intuitively we all respond — to human scale, to human dimension, human values, human society?”

Once the 1960s were over perhaps Oliver did not feel comfortable wearing his heart so nakedly on his sleeve. Nonetheless, in his next two ground-breaking anthologies (*Shelter in Africa*, 1971, and *Shelter, Sign and Symbol*, 1975) he continued to hammer on the humanistic contributions offered by vernacular design strategies, and to argue that academics should also study the survival of the vernacular spirit under conditions of catastrophe or extreme poverty. Upon completing his own summa for a more general readership, *Dwellings: The House Across the World* (1987), Oliver took early retirement from his academic post at the Architectural Association’s Department of Arts and History and was promptly asked to compile this *Encyclopedia*. An unstoppable ethnographer and consummate networker, Oliver took full advantage of conferences and publications set up by the Built Form and Culture group and the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments. Traveling for two years to collect data, take photographs, and recruit indigenous scholars, Oliver eventually corralled more than 750 contributors from more than 80 countries and a reliable editorial staff to put the world’s oldest and newest architectural traditions on the academic map for good.

At times the results look (in a generous serving of many thousands of photographs and drawings), and read (in clearly translated and tightly, if homogeneously, edited entries), like a spellbinding revelation from another galaxy. The sheer range of building types, arcane terms, avenues of analysis, and embedded meanings can be dizzying. That earnest if slightly token phrase, “cultural creativity,” never has to be employed; the ingenuity, complexity, and human-scale elegance of these manipulations of raw materials by “bottom-up” traditions (as contrasted with elite “top-down” professional creations) is obvious on practically every page.

In terms of structure, the compendium’s 2,384 pages are broken into three volumes, representing two principal parts. The opening volume, or Part One, “Theories and Principles,” moves expeditiously through an A-to-Z sequence (actually Aesthetic through Structuralist) of theoretical “approaches and concepts” in order to squeeze from these buildings their fullest possible meanings. The volume then covers “Culture Traits and Attributes,” a grab-bag of largely sociological topics, ranging from domestic routines, food, and concepts of “home,” to language, play and Westernization. Following a third, almost transitional section on “Environment,” the bulk of this first of three tomes zeroes in on the sheer physicality of vernacular buildings, capitalizing on the proven documentary strengths of European folk-life studies to scrupulously inventory and typologize materials, designs, modes of construction, graphic symbolism, and multiple functions.

Although specific examples abound here, nearly always coordinated with generous black-and-white visuals, the ruling

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**Figure 2.** Internal courtyard, Kawai Kanjiro house, Kyoto, Japan. (Source: EVAW, Vol. 1.)
point of view in the first volume is the scholar’s. Here is a definitive breakdown of angles of theoretical vision, analytical vocabularies, and aspects of context, design and utility of which any serious investigator of vernacular architecture simply must be aware. It is an invaluable summa of the field, upgrading its status on the academic landscape for the first time since Amos Rapoport’s *House Form and Culture* (1969), implicitly dignifying the creativity of vernacular builders around the world, and, one hopes, offering conceptual and practical guidelines for the urgent work of documenting, restoring and representing this long-neglected human heritage.

With the theoretical groundwork thus laid, Volumes Two and Three, entitled “Cultures and Habitats,” set out to march, with giant descriptive steps, through a generous sampling of the more-or-less distinctive house-building traditions of seven “continental regions.” Oliver and his authors begin with Asia, East and Central, tromping from west to east, and north to south, across huge zones that are “related as far as possible to geo-physical and climatic features, and . . . broadly correspond with the distribution of vernacular architecture traditions.” Depending on the reader’s personal origins, sometimes the experience is like roaming anew through the hometown of one’s childhood or reliving forced trips to summer vacation sites — only now having names for those shanties, barns, churches, and front porches (that most likely have been torn down or disintegrated since then), and discovering for the first time from which cultural roots they sprang.

Front-loading the *Encyclopedia* with theoretical material in Volume One does free up these geographical entries in Volumes Two and Three for an inventory of exclusively
descriptive building profiles. But throughout these sections, “See also” and “Reference” indicators in the page margins also tell where to flip back to Volume One for more generic background material (on, for instance, uses of “coral” or “stained glass”) and any relevant conceptual implications, or to jump forward to Volume Three’s comprehensive Bibliography. The impact of these crisply physical descriptions allows no theoretical orientation to flourish so well as, appropriately, that foundational approach of folk art studies: diffusion.

Of the countless permutations of the tug and pull between conservatism and adaptation present in these areal essays, few present the diversity of mixed genealogies or far-flung influences as well as Volume Three’s “Caribbean Islands” section. As Henry Fraser writes, since the early seventeenth century, “the Caribbean was the arena for an almost continuous European power struggle.” In photos and text we peruse this “creolization of the multiple colonial traditions” in terms of slightly miniaturized Spanish-, English-, Dutch-, French- and Danish-influenced buildings. Most such structures were modified to accommodate new conditions of heat, light, rainfall, and social status. And some were constructed by the new indigenous comprador class, standing shoulder to shoulder with mud-and-thatch native homes. Today they appear as an extreme example of the almost eerie international architectural museum left in colonialism’s wake.

It was the conscious intent of Oliver and his co-editors to create an “interactive” relationship between Parts One and Two, so that, as he explains, “a common building feature (e.g., Matrilocal residence) is not explained in Part Two every time a reference is made to it; an explanation of its relevance to building is to be found in Part One, sometimes through a specific example.” But this can also force heavy reliance on the Glossary, Lexicon, Bibliography and Index, found at the close of Volume Three (the early portions of which cover Latin America, North America, and Sub-Saharan Africa). So if you wish to explore, say, the full study of a domestic Maori dwelling, or whare puni, in Volume Two (which covers Asia, East and Central, Australasia and Oceania, Europe and Eurasia, Mediterranean and Southwest Asia), you are not only advised to crack open Volume One to Section VII, Number 5, Item G (which it takes a while to discover is also on p. 585) for architectural symbolism among the New Zealand Maori. But you will also want Volume Three for architectural terms, as well as pages 2,263-72 for bibliographic references on Maori dwellings. All this can leave you juggling eighteen pounds of encyclopedia on your lap or table top, while fighting off other architecture-seeking patrons who have gotten wind of this treasure. For me, it’s well worth the trouble, except for the fact that in digging into a mountain of such wonders, it is easy to get sidetracked by some building, tradition, window, material, or architectural response beyond one’s wildest dreams. Indeed, I suspect that once word gets out, this work will be pilfered by a highly democratic clientele. In the past few weeks my review has been interrupted by a steady stream

**FIGURE 4.** Plan, part elevation, and section of a wheelwright’s shop, Denmark: A) sawpit; B) small outhouse for storing sawn wood; C) lathe with fly wheel; D) hub cradle; E) carpenter’s bench; F) chopping block. (Source: EVAW, Vol. 1.)
of insistent xeroxers: a novelist delighted at the New England
textbook, a poet giddy over the glossary, a painter fixated on
proportional measure in Micronesia, a builder blown away by
the South Indian Toda tribe’s sacred dairies, a friend’s ten-
year-old who immediately opened her shutters so they would
function like Iranian wind-catching badgirs, and a landscaper
who unapologetically snatched the diagrams on southern
Sudanese cave shelters from my hands.

This reader cannot help wishing for a few additional
essays: a more definitive history of vernacular architecture as a
subject, a subfield, or even a literary and artistic model — per-
haps an update of Oliver’s marvelous Part One of Shelter and
Society (l969), which provided one of the field’s earliest intel-
lectual histories. This could have smoothly led into even
greater detail on the intricacies of working with three tiers of
contributors: consultants, advisory board, and entry authors —
for one is curious to eavesdrop on the debates which governed
the multitude of choices that went into such a project (the
lessons learned during the actual editing, the sacrifices of data
that hovered on the borders of categories or acceptability, the
decisions about not including more advisories on how different
scholars and disciplines conduct field research into vernacular
buildings). All this constitutes the exciting, often-exasperating,
superstructural “work” of vernacular architectural documenta-
tion and interpretation, and one hungers for more.

Also, this reader would have liked a separate discussion
on the social, technological, bureaucratic and other pressures
that constantly harass, denigrate and suppress vernacular
motivation and imagination. For example, contributor
Patricia E. Green writes that one reason for the “sad decline”
of vernacular technologies among Jamaican villagers (certain-
ly a factor in their waning elsewhere as well) is that “there is
often the stigma of it being ‘old-fashioned’, or ‘primitive’.” If
these volumes get the international distribution they deserve,
a decided benefit of this coverage could be to restore cultural
pride and preservationist sensibility to the inheritors of these
down-home traditions.

Of course, any cultural summary of such omnipotent
ambition (which must, nonetheless, be written and produced
by mere mortals, constrained by their own cultural/nation-
al/personal/professional frames) is bound to run into this
sort of nit-picking. Any presumed blind or underplayed
spots will also appear all the more glaring when one of the
work’s overriding goals is to stretch beyond such constraints
and view the world through the built forms of many voice-
less, and usually defenseless Others. I, for one, am delighted
to forgive Oliver’s project for nearly all my unmet longings,
as they are more than made up for by its monumental riches.
Nonetheless, the following struck me as deserving some sort
of redress — somehow, sometime.

Despite the fact that Oliver desired his work “to be
transparent, to reveal its omissions and imbalances, so that
indications may be given for future research,” the
Encyclopedia offers too few such suggestions, or “state of [any
particular] field” assessments. In fact, the sheer range of
structural types, their variable time depth and cultural intrici-
ateness, plus the unavoidable distillation of so much unfa-
familiar material and cultural diversity, cries out, in my
estimation, for almost each major entry to be climaxed by a
“Further Study” paragraph or two — in the manner, for
instance, that the Smithsonian Institution’s Handbook of
North American Indians helpfully ended each of its separately
authored entries. It could suggest the amplitude or (as is
more likely the case with vernacular architecture studies) the
woeful paucity of additional research material, together with
hints as to each author’s disciplinary orientation — a needed
frame for such an academically ecumenical reference. Such
an addition might highlight horizons of documentation and
research for the enthusiastic reader. It could “open up” the
very process of preparing these unavoidably incomplete
descriptions, so as to invite the sort of engaged, fieldwork-
based studies for which Oliver has waved a banner his entire
professional life. And as for conducting those investigations,
the Encyclopedia provides too few on-the-ground pointers.
Some chronicle of architectural fieldwork methodologies,
styless of interweaving verbal and visual ethnography, tech-
niques of photographic documentation, the vices and virtues
of particular approaches to drafting plans, elevations and
axonometrics, would have helped us nonarchitects, who
must make it up as we go along.

One also rummages pretty much in vain through these
descriptions work is that they give aid and comfort to the cultural
spirit. They can forget that part of the reason why these build-
ing’s work is that they give aid and comfort to the cultural
sciences overly impressed by Western theoretical concerns and
canons of scholarship — can overlook the rewarding, round-
the-clock experience of using these dwellings and spaces,
which “brings them to life” and often contains their ineffable
spirit. They can forget that part of the reason why these build-
ing’s work is that they give aid and comfort to the cultural
practices, formal and informal, which take place within them.

Even though Oliver correctly observes that “exhaustive
research in the language of architecture within specific cultures
has been disappointingly rare,” I have also found it profitable
when conducting architectural fieldwork to poke into folkloristic sources and ethnographic life histories, and to inquire into previous field workers’ notes and rescan ritual liturgies, to ferret out such material. More than mere emblems of authentication, these native points of view and experiences could awaken readers to indigenous perspectives and dignify their reflexive awareness of the paramount role of architecture in the maintenance of their own cultural identities.

Perhaps the trickiest aspect of fieldwork into any architectural tradition is to arrive at its underlying ethno-aesthetic principles and the everyday verbal articulations and unspoken, kinetic aspects of its design and building processes as they unfold. Four methods immediately come to mind for getting inside the intentions of vernacular builders. The first is to learn the native tongue well enough to gain entry into Oliver’s “language of architecture.” The second is participatory observation, where you get your hands dirty — and, often, your pride injured — in the actual building process, pitching in with keen eye and alert ear as one’s fellow builders “do their architectural thinking.” Unfortunately, ascertaining what “looks” or “feels” right in a completed native building or spatial configuration calls for the least common academic practice, according to Henry Glassie’s typology of scholars’ responses to material culture. “Ideally,” he writes in the Encyclopedia’s opening entry, “ethnographic study elicits co-cultural response, seeking to discover through observations and interviews how people feel about the buildings they see and use. . . . [But] especially in the study of historical buildings, the student is removed from the creators and users. In isolation with objects, scholars are forced back upon their own responses to material evidence.” Yet the great majority of this entire work’s examples are contemporary, or at least not so historical that some measure of admittedly difficult sleuthing and participatory ingenuity cannot turn up more indigenous clarification.

A third window into the aesthetic standards and world views of native house-makers can be their own graphic representations. Sometimes the most unexpected determinants of form acquire observable profile in such renditions as the Encyclopedia’s unfortunately rare inclusion of a Ngaju Dayak village drawing in Volume One. The fourth method is even more intersubjective: actually living in such buildings for long enough to see how they work on proxemic, sociological and symbolic levels. It was only after spending significant months in a South Indian village, for example, that I realized that those uneven, cow-dung-coated mud surfaces flooring the modest verandahs in front of nearly every thatched South Arcot home actually provided hipbone depressions and raised head supports for dozing together with one’s hosts during those lazy hours following the main meal on a hot day.

But in the face of Oliver’s overwhelmingly successful feat of rationally organizing, sequencing and describing the products of the world’s vernacular building traditions, these should only be considered as thought-provoking responses in the grander conversations these volumes have invited. What is without question is that the subject is now on the world’s screen forever, with cultural and academic respectability at last, providing ample materials for university syllabi, including reviews of relevant theories and case-studies — all in one place. (On the other hand, Cambridge University Press and Oliver must not be held accountable for the stylistic consequences of the most inspirational catalog of design options ever published, for this work will certainly lure out of the woodwork those alternative/appropriate bricoleurs who have gone into hiding for the last twenty years). Indeed, this is a noble return to the entire world of perhaps its most ignored, because most encompassing and “taken-for-granted,” cultural products. The Encyclopedia’s disciplined consistency of layout design, tightly controlled entry lengths, and writing style are counter-balanced by the expansive range of building and settlement types, and the luxurious array of visuals. And it is the Oliver project’s and Cambridge’s smart, sustained editorial control over a tough, collaborative decade which, despite today’s academic climate of disciplinary destabilization, bottom-line impatience (“do we really need a full course in this stuff?”), and post-modern antiromanticism, have successfully placed this vernacular celebration squarely before all our eyes. I challenge anyone to try and look away.