A score of years ago, there were very few schools of architecture in Europe or the United States where it was possible to study the buildings of tribal, folk or peasant cultures. Today a number of colleges include studies in vernacular architecture in the curriculum, and some schools in Africa, Latin America and the East are encouraging serious investigation into the built forms of the indigenous peoples of their countries. If the colleges and the architects who staff them, have introduced the subject into the spectrum of studies considered appropriate to the education of intending architects, we can be justified in assuming that they have firm grounds for doing so. Yet, as I visit different colleges in various parts of the world I am by no means certain that they have good reason for including this work; nor do I see much agreement in the way in which it should be approached.

When I joined the staff of the Architectural Association in the early 1960s, students in the first year were expected to make a model of some form of tribal or folk shelter – an Eskimo igloo in small sections of polystyrene perhaps, or a Colombian lake dwelling with its stilts standing on a mirror, and with chopped straw to imitate its thatch. No students at the school would make such a model today, but they might be deeply involved in the restoration of a crofter’s cottage in the Scottish Highlands, or documenting the house types of the Southern Sudan through extensive travelling, drawing and photographing. Attitudes to the subject have changed, but it is still thought valuable to be involved in it, even though the reasons for considering such work important in architectural education are not expressed. It seems to me that it is necessary now to ask the question: ‘Why study vernacular architecture?’
This question invites another: ‘What do we mean by “Vernacular Architecture”? ‘ Unfortunately it is not an easy question to answer; we can do much more by example than by definition. The etymological roots of the word ‘architect’, from the Greek arkhi- and tekton, mean ‘chief builder’, while ‘architecture’ is defined as the ‘science of building’. The word ‘vernacular’ derives from the Latin vernaculus, meaning ‘native’, so the definition ‘native science of building’ is really quite appropriate. In usage however, ‘vernacular’ generally refers to language or dialect of a people, while architecture is given a qualitative status. To bring some measure of neutrality into the terms used I suggested ‘shelter’, which laid emphasis on the common motivation for the building of all the structures that man inhabits. I admit that it is not a satisfactory word, for it has associations of the rudimentary rather than the complex, the utilitarian rather than the aesthetically pleasing. In using the generally accepted phrase ‘vernacular architecture’, I am embracing all the types of building made by people in tribal, folk, peasant and popular societies where an architect, or specialist designer, is not employed. To me, so general a term is only of limited value and I am working on a more useful and accurate terminology, which I hope to introduce at a later date.

One reason why I think that a definition of the terms we use is important goes right to the heart of the subject. Students, teachers or professionals involved in architecture are concerned with the design process, whereby a specific set of solutions is posed to an

Figure 1.1
A dwelling of the Southern Sotho, with fine thatch and its earth wall decorated on the windward side with coloured stones. Lesotho, Southern Africa.
architectural problem. The problem is usually the ‘brief’; the solutions are co-ordinated into a ‘design’ or ‘scheme’, but it is evident to me that in the vernacular, this is hardly ever the case. An African man may describe a circle on the ground with a stick at arm’s length which will constitute the plan of his dwelling, and he may mark out the boundary of his yard. However, when he builds he will use traditional forms, employ the technology of his ancestors and may have his hut plastered and decorated by his wife, with designs that are symbolic to his people and immediately identifiable with them. A limited degree of design is involved but the architectural solutions have been arrived at over generations. They may be subtly modified or developed in time, but as responses to experience of conditions and use rather than by the application of rigorous method, analysis of the problems involved, or even by the ‘lateral thinking’ that we call inspiration. On the other hand, the vernacular owner-builders
will dig and puddle their own clay, mix it with straw and dung, mould the walls, cut the poles, harvest and trim the straw, construct and thatch the roof – build in fact, their own houses. We may seek to gain a little experience on site during training, but we do not expect to build every structure we design. Both at the design and the implementation stages the processes of formal architecture and vernacular architecture are very different; so I am obliged to repeat the question which forms the title of this chapter: ‘Why study vernacular architecture?’

Up to now I have used the word ‘we’ several times to denote those involved in the studying, teaching or practice of architecture. Yet there are many who examine vernacular architecture who are none of these. It may help us to consider briefly why they study the subject – especially as we are so dependent on the results of their research. A substantial proportion of them have been amateurs rather than professionals, or they have been missionaries, district commissioners, even army surveyors. Their methods have not been those of architects and their motivations to study tribal, folk or peasant peoples have been quite different. Often, shelter plays a small part in their research, which has been intended to serve other purposes. In summarizing a few of them, I will consider the approaches taken, rather than the disciplines that such researchers represent. Of these, the first is an approach to pure research, with the sole purpose of extending the sum of human knowledge. The scrutiny of all aspects of an unfamiliar society, including its building, is pursued as an end in itself unjustified by any reasons related to its application or usefulness. The assumption is that with the knowledge gained, applications may follow, but this is unknowable until the knowledge has been acquired. This approach, although unusual in architecture, has its merits, for it means that in theory the data obtained are not prejudiced by underlying motives. Akin to this, but with the advantage of methodological techniques, is the approach of the anthropologist. Within this field objectivity is sought, although the ‘observer paradox’ is recognized: the very presence of the anthropologist makes it impossible to write an account of a society in its virgin state. Building techniques, the preparation of materials, the naming of parts, the functions of spaces and the symbolism of shelter may occasionally be recorded in the anthropological approach, even though some of the factors of special interest to architects, such as structural principles or the perception of spaces within a building, may not be revealed. If anthropology is ‘the study of man’, it should also be the subject of study of its own various disciplines: a social anthropologist is likely to come up with different information
about a society and its architecture than one who is concerned with the documentation of material culture.

Among non-literate societies history often takes the form of myth, having a symbolic truth important to the people concerned, rather than being verifiable, factual evidence. The history of a building type has often to be inferred, or deduced from archaeological remains, when other data are not available. Shelter constructed of stone can leave more tangible evidence than that made from woven matting or wattle and mud. Archaeology is contributing to the study of early forms of vernacular building even though the evidence of long vacated sites is open to misinterpretation, or subject to wide approximations as to the numbers of occupants and the date or duration of occupancy. The archaeological approach is concerned with origins and the uncovering of primitive roots of a culture; historians apply themselves to the analysis of the material and documentary evidence of the past, reconstructing it in patterns that have their own logic. An inordinate emphasis has been placed in history studies on nations and states, on battles and conquerors, on kings, princes and prelates. As vassals and serfs, the bulk of the population has been acknowledged but, until recently, the culture of the majority has received little attention. Now, however, many historians are trying to understand the lives, economies, culture and social structures of the common people. If the written record in many cases is limited, much of the other evidence may remain with us, including weapons, artifacts of pottery and metal, items of clothing and adornment, and the essentials of shelter.

Figure 1.3
Archaeological evidence of Middle Bronze Age granite ‘hut circles’. Grimspound on Dartmoor, Devon, England.
One reason for this recent trend has been political; Marxist historians have had good reason to investigate the culture of the working classes. Their researches have helped to restore some balance in historical studies and have undoubtedly influenced even those who do not share their political persuasion. Analogous to this has been the rise of young historians in developing countries, who have been examining their traditional institutions with an enthusiasm and pride which was not present in the years of humiliation and colonization. One outcome of these changes in historical method and motivation has been the conservation of old and traditional buildings. Museums of folk-life with artifacts assembled in conserved examples of vernacular architecture have developed since the 1930s in most European countries and in the United States; some countries in the developing world, anxious to reawaken pride in the indigenous cultures are following this lead. Like folkloric ballets and concerts, such museums are inclined to be idealized, but they are generally supported by thorough research into the vernacular architecture of the cultures concerned. Much is learned about the buildings from their dismantling and reassembly, and they continue to serve an important educational function.

Of course, there is a romantic interest in traditional buildings which is antiquarian, and sometimes, purely nostalgic. Vernacular architecture can offer shelter from the realities of the present, and encouragement to those who believe that life in past centuries was better than life today; or that traditional buildings, no matter how insanitary, damp, smoke-filled or insect-infested they may have

Figure 1.4
A house wall painted with animal motifs. National Museum of Handicrafts, Delhi, which includes a collection of Indian indigenous building traditions.
been, were superior to housing here and now. Less conspicuous, but perhaps as sentimental in its emotional source, is the ‘low culture’ attitude which idealizes popular and folk culture at the expense of ‘high culture’. Resentment at the values placed on sophisticated and complex art and architecture, which appear to esteem the intellect at the expense of feeling, encourages a neoprimitivist view. Rousseau’s image of the ‘noble savage’ survives in an uncritical admiration of all that is regarded as naive or unsophisticated. At the extremes of this position there are no criteria and no values.

In contrast to this subjectivity is the pragmatism of the geographer who considers settlement in relation to resources. The availability of building materials, the capacity of the land to support a population, the kind of economy that evolves and the trading relationships with other communities that can be identified – all these have direct bearing on the kind, form, location and density of buildings. Other factors also have bearing on vernacular form, especially the effects of climate which have to be controlled, modified or utilized. Further particularization of the approaches that have revealed to us much of what we know about vernacular architecture, is probably unnecessary: for the present purposes I have indicated sufficiently, I trust, the degree to which we are indebted to the amateur and professional researchers, anthropologists, historians, political theorists, antiquarians and geographers for much of the knowledge that we have of the subject. Perhaps we can recognize ourselves in some of them; if we respond favourably to the work of some and with less interest, or even uncomprehendingly, to the work of others we are probably acknowledging how much they have influenced our own attitudes. They all have reasons for studying vernacular architecture, and most of them are valid. So the question now is, ‘Why should architects, and architectural students, study vernacular architecture?’ Let us look first, at some of the ways in which architects use their study of the subject.

Few historians are architects, although a number of architects have become historians. One of the most important ways in which they apply their study of vernacular architecture is in the service of the historian. With the acquisition of knowledge of traditional building, architects can play an essential role in conservation. Their advice is sought not only in the selection of structures or complexes that should be saved, restored or removed for conservation elsewhere, but also for professional advice on the way in which these measures are undertaken. Whereas architectural conservation has a long history in relation to palaces, cathedrals, churches and the residences of the gentry, the conservation of modest peasant and
Yeoman buildings has been more by default than by policy. Losses sustained through wars, through rebuilding programmes, the siting of new towns, airports and industrial developments have been catastrophic in some countries like Holland or Denmark, or in Japan and in certain of the provinces of China. Conservation of the vernacular heritage, except in folk-life museums, has come almost too late for some of them, but fortunately, legislation and the listing of valued buildings has been undertaken in other countries. Conservation architects informed as to traditional building at domestic scale, are being slowly but increasingly employed by the more enlightened authorities.

More interpretative is the work of architects who seek to recreate the qualities of vernacular traditions without imitating them. This requires great sympathy for the work of unknown craftsmen and anonymous builders of generations past, but the ‘neovernacular’ architects do not slavishly copy their works. Recognizing in examples of their own choosing, qualities of space, form, use of materials, details, proportion and other expressions of native sensibility, they try to emulate them in their own design. They may appreciate that their approach to designing is fundamentally different but they endeavour to create buildings that stimulate similar responses in those who see or live in them. For them, the vernacular is a source of inspiration. At a more superficial level it is also a source for the designers of buildings for the tourist and ‘second home’ industries. They are less concerned with the lessons that they might learn, than with the copying of surface appearances. Tourism and the annual
holiday are ritualized escapes from urban life or from the familiar surroundings of home and office. Designing for these industries of escapism implies the provision of the comforts of home in romantic, even fictionalized settings. As in other forms of tourist art, the reduction in scale of some elements and the exaggeration of others, leads to a *kitsch* version of the authentic.

If the latter is the architecture of the unnecessary, exploiting the vernacular tradition of the necessary building, the architects and planners who are involved in designing for the developing countries

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**Figure 1.6**
Tourist accommodation in Corfu, with forms designed to accord with concepts of the vernacular architecture of the island (see also Figure 1.8).

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**Figure 1.7**
‘Bustee housing’, built from waste materials by migrants to the city. These examples in East Calcutta, India, have been destroyed, but the housing problem remains.
of the Third World are concerned with the essential. The critical problems of rapid urbanization in the cities of Latin America, Africa or the East have led to violent measures. Whole towns of ‘illegal’ settlements have been destroyed in the futile attempt to stem the flow of migrants to the cities; new squatter housing instantly takes their place. Although traditional village building has declined and the barridas of Peru, the bustees of Calcutta or the favelas of Brazil are made from salvaged and scrap materials, some architects have seen in the peri-urban squatters’ passionate desire to build their own homes, a first glimpse of a new vernacular. They try to provide the support systems that may make its emergence possible.

Poised between the eclecticism of vernacular-inspired architecture and the urgency of self-build in rapidly urbanizing centres, is a small, but not insignificant trend among those dissatisfied with the world of commerce, industrialization and conspicuous consumption of energy and resources. More prevalent among younger adults, and more possible in the United States where building regulations are less restrictive, the building of personally crafted dwellings is the proving ground for new ideas based on vernacular precedent. Log cabin construction has been studied and developed with ingenuity, respecting and learning from the tradition but introducing innovations appropriate to the present. Associated with the commune movement and the advocates of ‘alternative’ life-styles, it is more widespread than may be realized and is heavily supported by books and periodicals which promote rational technologies.

All these attitudes, and others shared by some architects, are reflected to some degree in architectural education and account, in part, for the increase in importance of vernacular studies in the curriculum. I am sure that we can recognize in such courses echoes of the methods, approaches and publications of researchers whose motivations have been discussed already: the searcher after new or lost knowledge, the anthropologist, the historian, the archaeologist, the political theorist, the antiquarian, the romantic idealist, the geographer and so on. Similarly, the work of the architectural historian, the conservationist, the neovernacular architect, the derivative designer, the advocacy planner in the development context, or the home-builder dedicated to alternative technology, influences our interpretation of the subject.

Underlying the inclusion of these studies in an architectural course is the belief that the knowledge gained is of fundamental value. Bearing in mind that, as I have explained already, the design process of the architect is very different from the means whereby a building in the vernacular gets built, what are the lessons that can
WHY STUDY VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE? (1978)

Figure 1.8
The diversity and clarity of built forms in a village street. Pelekas, Kerkira (Corfu), Greece.

be learned? It seems that most people who are attracted to vernacular architecture, have admired examples on aesthetic grounds, responding to the simplicity of line and purity of form that is to be found in, for instance, the dwellings in the small towns of the Greek islands, or the incorporation of sculptured relief on the compounds of the Hausa in northern Nigeria. Very little is known of the aesthetic of tribal and folk cultures, especially with regard to their shelter, so we rely on our own sensibilities and subjective responses to the buildings and their details.

Architects in the twentieth century developed a functionalist aesthetic which esteemed forms that expressed fitness for purpose. In vernacular buildings that have been constructed to meet a specific need we may see evolve over decades, or even centuries, structures that have been modified and adjusted in form and detail until they satisfied the demands placed upon them. In a great many countries, farm buildings – stores, stables, granaries and the like – demonstrate the ‘close fit’ of the structure made to suit the requirements of a specific function. In certain structures this functional role is achieved through the discovery or the exploitation of physical laws – I am thinking here of rope and fibre bridges, or of the membranes using tension principles that provide the dwellings of desert nomads over vast areas of Africa and the Middle East. Economy and life-support systems clearly play an important part in determining these tents, for they must be light, portable, easily dismantled and assembled. We can of course, learn a great deal about structural principles in vernacular buildings, which often demonstrate them in the use and
placing of every constituent element. Often, remarkably sophisticated results are achieved with relatively simple technologies. This is sometimes evident in buildings that have been constructed in order to serve a technological purpose, such as windmills and watermills, which have been ingeniously developed to utilize natural, nonexpendable energies, in the service of a wide variety of functions. Such examples of vernacular technology can teach us much about creative extensions of use and, in the case of windmills, even of vernacular servomechanisms.

It is not only in the use of energy that we can learn about the employment of natural resources, for most forms of indigenous shelter have to be constructed from available materials. In different regions we can see the intelligent and sensitive use of stone, mud, timber and grasses, even of animal hides. Many different methods and techniques have been developed, sometimes extending the potential of the material to its optimum capacity to serve as a load-bearing or cladding element. Many societies have achieved an ecological balance which maintains, in a steady state, the relationship between the availability of a resource and their consumption of it; I need hardly emphasize that this is a lesson that we certainly need to learn. Humans are the most adaptable of mammals and through their intelligence they have been able to survive in regions of abundance and in others of limited resources: whether rain forests and swamps, arid deserts or icy wastes. In spite of extremes of heat or cold, these environments have been host to different peoples who have evolved cultures appropriate to such conditions. In their

Figure 1.9
Functional building, e.g. a windmill that drives a mechanism for draining land that is subject to flooding. A drainage channel with sluice-gate runs from the mill. East Anglia.
WHY STUDY VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE? (1978)

Figure 1.10
Many Tuareg nomads use tents made of dyed and sewn goatskins, stretched over light frames and held in tension with hide ropes. Sahara desert, north of Timbuktu, Mali.

shelter they have incorporated numerous ways of utilizing available resources and, according to the circumstances, of modifying climates by warming, insulating or cooling. We could be less wasteful in our employment of natural materials and in our methods of heating and refrigerating buildings, if we studied vernacular solutions and profited by them.

Although I could continue generalizing, I have probably cited here sufficient broad examples to indicate that we have much to gain as students and architects from the study of indigenous precedents and current practices. Particularization is certainly necessary and much could arise from original field research. Just as some fundamental architectural principles are to be ascertained in vernacular shelter, so too, the means whereby we study them can be educationally beneficial. For instance, there are methods of record, from measured drawings to statistical analyses, full-scale details to tests of structural performance or climate regulation, which we can apply to folk shelter as a preparation for their application to more complex architecture. The practical advantages in education are not difficult to enumerate. Why then, am I dissatisfied with all that I have summarized up to now? Why do I feel that these are not the most important reasons why we should study vernacular architecture? All the reasons I have discussed have their place and can be of great help to us; I do not discredit them. But it is in the embodiment of values that I feel the study is most rewarding. In tribal, folk and peasant societies, shelter symbolizes much more than can be visibly apparent. People who build their own dwellings invest them with