The importance of the study of vernacular architecture (1993)

Before we can begin to consider whether the study of vernacular architecture is important, or if so, in what ways its importance may be evident, we have to define what we mean by ‘vernacular architecture’. The term ‘vernacular’ is a linguistic one, and when it is applied to architecture it becomes a part of the familiar linguistic analogy of ‘architecture as a language of form’, and vernacular architecture can be said to be ‘the architectural language of the people’ with its ethnic, regional and local ‘dialects’. As a phrase it is still unknown and unused in many countries, but it is gaining greater currency across the world. Even so, vernacular architecture is often associated with ‘popular’ architecture. A distinction can be made between the vernacular – of and by the people, and ‘popular’ architecture designed for the people – whether in suburbs, main street services or the buildings of public institutions.

Defining the vernacular

In the British Isles there is no doubt that the timber-framed houses and other buildings of East Anglia or the Weald of Kent are vernacular; nor is there any question that the characteristic stone-built villages of the Cotswolds are likewise. But houses of such solidity and construction are not perceived as vernacular in some countries, where the phrase is frequently applied to smaller, simpler buildings. Of short life and made of local, and often very light materials, they may be the constructions of ethnic or other minorities. But, if the substantially built houses of the Mindanao in the Philippines,
with their sculptured ‘horn bill’ decorations and massive tree trunk columns are ‘vernacular’, are the pile dwellings of the Baja fishermen also vernacular? If the compounds of the people of Burkina Faso or Cameroon are considered vernacular, should the temporary structures of the nomadic Fulani who pass through their territory also be so regarded?

The mistake may be to take a structural, materials or formal view of the built forms of various societies and to classify them according to their degree of permanence, technology and form. It is better I believe, to consider these aspects of the architecture of cultures in the context of their environments and essentially, in relation to their capacity to meet the values and needs of the societies that have built them.

While this definition raises questions in specific instances in many parts of the world, it may be accepted as what it is – a defining ‘tool’ which we may use when discussing the buildings of cultures that come within the orbit of our concerns and studies. However, the question arises as to whether they are important, and if so, to whom?

The number of people present at an international seminar compared with the tens of thousands of architects and architectural students in Mexico alone, is evidence enough that it is not a subject that is important to the majority of Mexican architects and students. It is clear that the subject is important to those who do participate, but likewise, it is evident that there are thousands of architects, practising or studying, to whom it has no significance. The best we can
say is that it is valued by some architects and by some anthropologists and indeed, by some, but by no means all professionals in a variety of disciplines. To the others it may indeed, be unrecognized by them as a subject that merits study.

Approaches to the study of vernacular architecture

Ours is a subject without a discipline. It is not studied in the way that medicine, or law, or computer technology, or even formal architectural design are studied – with a curriculum, method and qualifications that may lead to specifically identified employment. This is both a weakness and a strength of vernacular architecture studies – permitting freedom from the constraints of discipline, but
also promoting a high level of uncertainty as to its practicality and usefulness, with serious questions as to purpose and method. We should not forget the important contributions made to our subject by those whose discipline did not bear upon it, or whose interest is not related to any academic pursuits: the amateur historians, the enthusiasts and devotees of vernacular building who are directed only by their love of the vernacular. Their passion is not to be dismissed – on the contrary, it is our common ground. Most of those among us who have embarked upon serious study of the vernacular have been motivated by our delight in the buildings, our appreciation of their beauty, our admiration of their simplicity, their honesty or their appropriateness.

Yet, beyond the level of aesthetic appreciation, which discards as inferior all that we consider to be lacking in quality or merit, there is much to be learned and understood. This is where the specialists of particular fields – architects, anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, geographers and many others – can apply their perceptions, skills, knowledge and expertise to traditional buildings, revealing much that we in other fields may not see or comprehend. As yet we hardly have a forum, or even a publication for the sharing of this knowledge and the fruits of our research, while the specific nature of our respective disciplines often isolates us from a more rounded understanding. We are all aware of the anthropologist who cannot describe a structure or communicate through drawings; of the architect whose study is of form but who has given no thought to symbolism or meaning; or of the geographer whose concept of spatial relationships is quite different from the architects’ notion of space.

Former commitments to singular approaches are now being questioned. The meticulous recording of structural information and building details has a place: through careful observation and documentation much has been revealed about the distribution of types, the prevalence of motifs, the diffusion of technologies, the history of techniques. But the endless accumulation of data without relevance is of dubious value. Ideas of resource determinism – classification of the vernacular by the prevalence of the use of ‘local’ materials has little significance in many parts of the world. Even climatic determinism has been shown to be a less reliable key to architectural form than it might seem. Anthropological studies in kinship, inheritance and activity systems reveal much concerning values – but often without reference to the buildings and environmental contexts that accommodate them. Art historians who have studied decoration and detail but neglected construction, museologists who have
saved exceptional buildings but ignored the lesser structures, are now seen as having too narrow a focus in their research. Nevertheless, intensive research in specific cultures by anthropologists who are aware of the significance of buildings has demonstrated, for example, the complexity of binary classification within the Kabyle dwelling, or the concept of the community house as cosmos among the Tucanoans of Amazonia. Such research has brought new dimensions to the study of vernacular architecture.

In the past few decades there have been approaches that have not been tied to a single discipline: structuralist approaches that have related change in architecture to change in social development, phenomenological approaches which have stemmed from experimental analysis of the relationship of the individual to space; ethno-archaeological approaches that have sought to understand the patterns of living of former cultures through the study of presently surviving ones; behavioural studies which have related patterns of culture and custom to the built environment.

While there is evidence of an expanding awareness of the advantages of multidisciplinary work in vernacular architecture, the methods and tools of study are for the most part, still thoroughly entrenched in the specific professional disciplines. So for example, architects bring their capacity to express structure and form through plans, sections, elevations and orthographic projections, even though these are by no means always comprehensible to those without training in them. At another level, anthropologists place considerable importance on fieldwork and participant observation, very different from the objective recording and analysis of the architects. Some of the methods used by specialists in certain fields are applicable only to particular vernacular contexts. Thus the accounts, probates, civic records and other documents that may be of great value to historians in literate societies are inaccessible or nonexistent with reference to preliterate and nonliterate peoples. As a result of these problems we may often resort to the methods of record which are materially productive – typologies of buildings, plans or details; tables of occupancy and statistics of density; climatic analyses of diurnal range; tests of building materials and their performance; histories of buildings to establish their precise dates of construction or the dendrochronology of their timbers – and so on. All these methods have their uses, all are uncovering aspects of vernacular architecture in many countries and cultures. But they can also be limiting – displacement activities for energies which might be directed elsewhere if other purposes were known.
In the developing fields of vernacular research, methods employed in geography, archaeology or sociology, also demand methods in the acquisition and analysis of data involving specialized mathematical and computer skills. Other aspects, such as the analysis of spatial relationships within or between buildings, may inspire new kinds of
diagrams and graphics to convey complex patterns. Occasionally, the methods of research and their presentation from more than one discipline may be brought together, as for example, when anthropological diagrams of kinship over generations are related to growth and change in domestic plan. We can expect to see more of such developments in the future as the scope of research, and the methods by which it is conducted, continue to widen.

How much importance is attached to the researches undertaken in vernacular architecture is frequently conditioned by the preferences and prejudices of professionals in specific fields. Our criteria are largely shaped by our understanding of what is of significance to our own discipline. Historians ignore geographical data; anthropologists may see little merit or value in architectural typologies or may question the evidence of diffusion in the light of current disregard of diffusionist theory; sociologists may have little patience for phenomenological accounts. As awareness of alternative methods of study and of the growth in knowledge of vernacular architecture increases, we may see these prejudices diminish. The day may come when certain anthropological and sociological studies may be included in the education of architects and environmental designers, who have already encompassed some geographical and historical studies within their courses. But the day when architectural studies are an integral part of the education of anthropologists may still be a long way off.

Applications of vernacular research

If research in vernacular architecture is being developed and refined, it is reasonable to ask what the practical applications of such studies might be. Among the most visible is the selection of vernacular buildings for in situ conservation, or for dismantling and re-erection in open-air museums. There is a tendency to choose the most spectacular examples. When new buildings are constructed to old models, their decoration or forms are often exaggerated and even the open-air museums are often clinically clean. Then there is the response of architects who perceive the merits of vernacular architecture. Once it was the forms – and the white walls of Greek island houses – which inspired architects. But today, more are interested in regional qualities that are related to the use of local materials and they may seek inspiration in culturally specific building forms. Toraja roofs are erected in Sulawesi; the Sumatran Minangkabau house has obviously become a symbol, not of Indonesia, but due
to the centuries-old presence of some Minangkabau in Negri Sembilan province, of Malaysia. But if some uses of the vernacular by architects are imitative and cosmetic, several have studied climatic modification by traditional techniques or made intelligent use of indigenous building methods.

Architects and planners engaged in development projects – such as settlement upgrading, sites and services schemes, or low-cost housing – have drawn upon a wide experience of vernacular skills and know-how. So for instance, the Nubian vault system ‘discovered’ by Hasan Fathy, the Egyptian architect, has been applied by teams of the Development Workshop in Angola and Niger. Such technology transfer, has the potential for overcoming the disastrous effects of the depletion of local resources. But there are problems. As structural anthropologists would argue, technological transfer will also mean corresponding changes in society, and there are serious cultural implications when new technologies are introduced. Often the values of a culture are difficult to ascertain.

The importance of vernacular architecture studies

Vernacular architecture in countries throughout the world is threatened. Fortunately, the scale of deliberate destruction, such as the Ceaucescu regime perpetrated in numerous villages in Romania is not widespread, but the vernacular suffers from indifference and
ignorance of its historic or social value, and from being assigned low status in housing. Mass migration from the rural areas to the cities of the developing world is driven by the push–pull factors of sophisticated urban living and fragile job opportunities. In the process, traditional homes and life-styles are abandoned, and in the villages, urban housing becomes a model. Confronting the widespread decline in respect for the vernacular, studies in the subject have become of major importance. They are necessary in the quest for knowledge of the diversity of mankind’s solution to the problems of dwelling and accommodation of sacred and secular community functions. But they are also significant for the mutual benefit of cultures all over the world. With the reservations noted already, the transfer of skills may help solve resource depletion or improve climate modification. Practical applications of indigenous solutions to environmental problems may give a material incentive to the urgent recovery of vernacular know-how.

Yet, the need for vernacular studies is more complex than this. A culture without the presence of its history is a culture without roots and, very possibly, without meaning. The habitations of mankind are the scene of most of our activities from birth to death; the temples and shrines, meeting houses and communal social structures are the places where people meet their fellows, and commune with their deities. In scale and in detail, the vernacular offers antidotes to the architecture of power, to monumentalism and the profligate use of resources. It touches the well-springs of inheritance and points in many ways to technologically undamaging, culturally acceptable

Figure 2.5
A group of meeting houses, totem carving houses and other traditional structures, recently built by the Cowachin of Duncan, Vancouver Island, Canada.
and symbolically significant buildings in compatible landscape environments. This paper has a hidden agenda; to those who believe that the study of vernacular architecture is important, it is a plea for cross-cultural, interdisciplinary research. By sharing our perceptions and understanding, let alone our research methods, by endeavouring to resolve the dichotomy between those who study vernacular architecture and those who live in it, we may gain new, lasting and invaluable insights to the habitations of mankind. Such insights can lead to support and assistance for surviving vernacular traditions, and can inform policies and design in housing that will have to meet the exponential growth in populations in all continents.