

ARCHITECTURE FOR ALL

THE
PHOTOGRAPHY
OF PAUL
OLIVER

Paul Oliver Vernacular Architecture Library



Front: Street scene, Paros, Cyclades, Greece, probably 1966
Tower and old town, Corsica, probably Calvi or Bastia, France, date unknown



ARCHITECTURE FOR ALL

The PHOTOGRAPHY OF PAUL OLIVER

What do we mean by 'architecture', and what does the term cover when we use it? Does it refer only to buildings designed by architects, or does it extend to all buildings? What explains the diversity of architectural traditions around the world? And how can today's architects learn from and respond to this diversity of architectural form, material and decoration?

These are some of the questions that concerned the architectural scholar **PAUL OLIVER** (1927–2017) throughout a career that spanned more than five decades. The author and editor of a range of influential publications including *Shelter and Society* (1969), *Dwellings: The House Across the World* (1987) and the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (1997) Oliver called for an **INCLUSIVE** and **CROSS-CULTURAL** approach

to **ARCHITECTURE**; one that acknowledges the intricate relationship between architecture, society and culture, and that recognises all buildings, not just those of specific cultures or those made by architects, as cultural expressions worthy of admiration, study and conservation. 'Architecture', he wrote, 'is not the prerogative of a few nor the privilege of an elite; it is **FOR ALL**, and **BY ALL**'.

This exhibition is the first to document and showcase the photography of Paul Oliver. Throughout his career, Oliver was as prolific a photographer as he was a writer. During his travels that took him to more than 70 countries in all continents, he took around **25,000 PHOTOGRAPHS** that together capture the ingenuity, richness and diversity of the architectural traditions of the world. An amateur photographer driven by a personal interest in and curiosity about other peoples and cultures, Oliver documented building materials, technologies, forms and details, as well as the **PEOPLE** that made, used and lived among them. Altogether the

**‘ARCHITECTURE IS NOT THE PREROGATIVE OF A FEW
NOR THE PRIVILEGE OF AN ELITE;**



Log building and stave church, Borgund, Norway, 1992

it IS FOR all, and BY all'



Decorated trulli, Alberobello, Bari, Puglia, Italy, 2000



Sanders longhouse, Lettaford, Devon, United Kingdom, 1998

photographs constitute an unparalleled record of the world's architecture during the second half of the twentieth century.

The selection of photographs in the exhibition aims to capture the inclusive and cross-cultural understanding of architecture propagated by Oliver. They include images of landscapes, buildings and architectural details from cultures around the world: monumental as well as ordinary; traditional as well as modern; everyday as well as unique. Taken from the early 1960s up to 2008, they showcase the variety of ways in which all cultures around the world continue to express their **NEEDS, BELIEFS, VALUES** and **ASPIRATIONS** in architectural form.

PAUL OLIVER

Paul Oliver (1927–2017) graduated from the University of London in 1955. From the late 1950s well into the 2000s, he taught art and architecture at various institutions, including the National Gallery, the Architectural Association and Oxford Brookes University.

Although Oliver was interested in all forms of architecture, the main focus of his research

and teaching was on so-called **VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE**: the traditional and indigenous forms of architecture that are specific to and characteristic of a place, people or culture and that are often made without the involvement of professional architects. In his writings, he commonly referred to such as architecture as 'the architecture of the people' and argued for the need to give it a prominent place in architectural history. Oliver studied vernacular architecture all around the world, carrying out **FIELDWORK** in a large number of countries, most notably Ghana, Turkey and Costa Rica. During such fieldwork, he always made a conscious effort to also investigate other, more formal or 'modern' forms of architecture.

Throughout his career, Oliver edited and wrote a number of influential publications on architecture. His first major edited publication, *Shelter and Society* (1969), aimed to show how all forms of architecture were built 'to meet the needs of their respective communities and contain values special to them'. He further explored the relationship between **ARCHITECTURE, CULTURE AND SOCIETY** in his subsequent publications, including *Shelter*



Pink and blue houses, Burano, Venice, Italy, 1979



House and totem poles, Haida, British Columbia, Canada, 1979



Thatched farmhouse, Mullinahone, Co. Tipperary, Ireland, 1997



Post-disaster housing, Gibellina, Sicily, Italy, 1973

in Africa (1971), Shelter, Sign and Symbol (1975) and Dwellings: the House Across the World (1987; 2nd edition 2003), all of which dealt with mainly vernacular forms of architecture. With Dunroamin: The Suburban Semi and its Enemies (1981, with Ian Bentley and Ian Davis) and Architecture: An Invitation (1990, with Richard Hayward) he widened his scope to include more formally designed architecture, before truly focusing on vernacular architecture with his monumental **ENCYCLOPEDIA OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF THE WORLD** (1997). The Encyclopedia won the Sir Bannister Fletcher Award for Art and Architecture in 1998 and was later complemented by the Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World (2007, with Alex Bridge and Marcel Vellinga).

Oliver was an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects and a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. In 2003 he received an MBE in recognition of his contribution to architectural education.

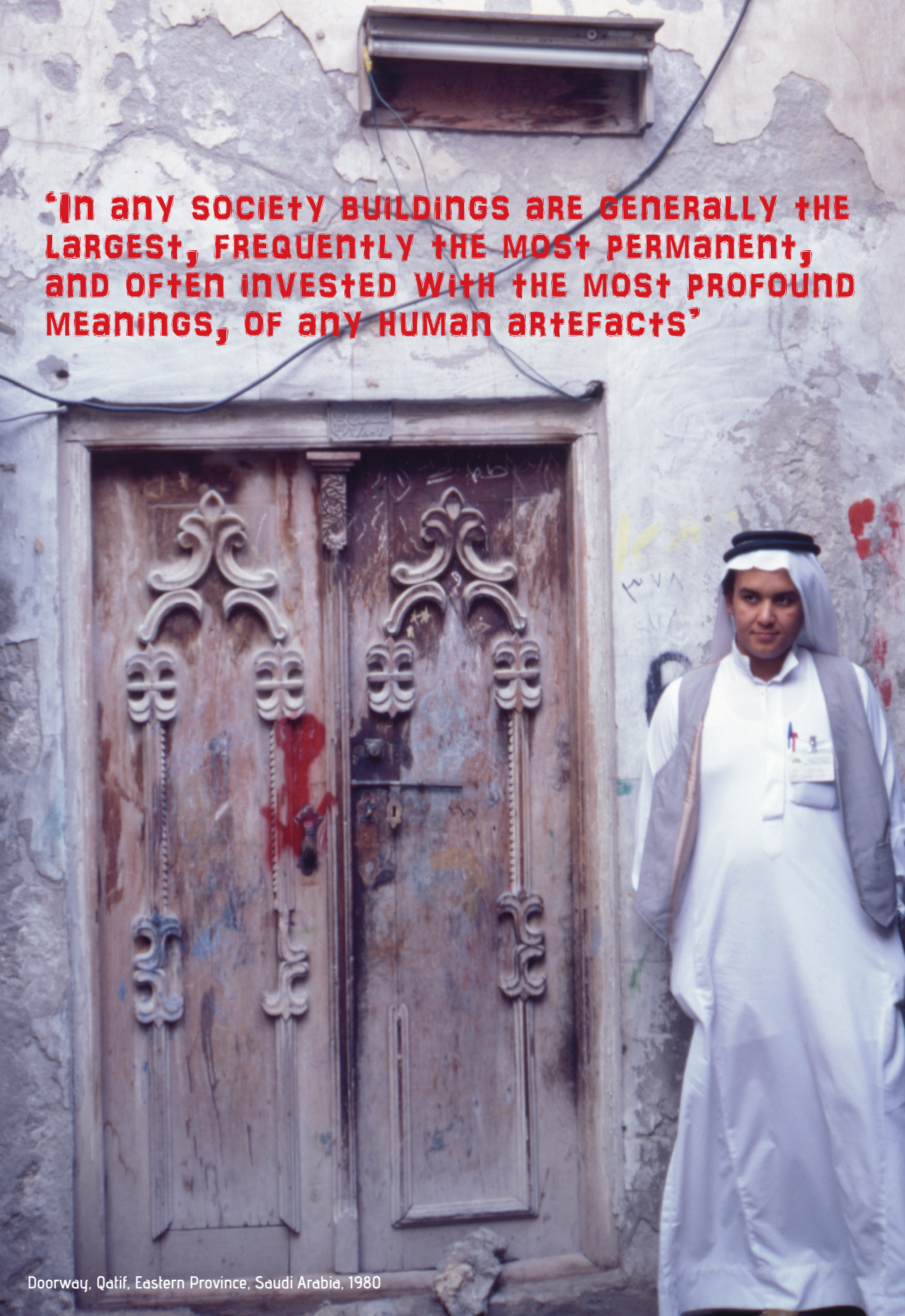
INCLUSIVE ARCHITECTURE

In all his writings, Oliver emphasised the importance of an **INCLUSIVE** and **CROSS-CULTURAL** approach to architecture. According to Oliver, too many architectural scholars, historians and critics limit their attention to a select number of buildings only, often monumental and unique ones that are designed by architects 'to provide lavish, unused spaced for the mighty privileged few'. The majority of people in the world, however, live and work in non-monumental forms of architecture that are often built without the involvement of architects. Such everyday, informal or vernacular architecture is commonly disregarded by the architectural establishment, but nonetheless forms a fundamental and valuable part of the **INHERITED BUILT ENVIRONMENT** of the world. As such, Oliver argued, it should be recognised and appreciated, documented and analysed.



Tallensi courtyard, Bongo, Ghana, probably 1964

'In any SOCIETY BUILDINGS ARE GENERALLY THE LARGEST, FREQUENTLY THE MOST PERMANENT, and OFTEN INVESTED WITH THE MOST PROFOUND MEANINGS, OF any HUMAN artefacts'



Doorway, Qatif, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, 1980



Façade with gates, former Yugoslavia, probably Bosnia, exact location unknown, 1985



'Moon entrance', Lu-Dai village, Guilin, China, 1992



Mosque, Larabanga, Ghana, 2007



1967 International and Universal Exposition (Expo 67) pavilion, Montreal, 1971

A recurrent theme in Oliver's writings is the close relationship between architecture, culture and society. Architecture may be appreciated for its form, scale or materiality and be recognised as 'a source of delight and also of inspiration'. But to truly understand its meaning and significance, one should move beyond an aesthetic appreciation to try and identify how it expresses **SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, VALUES AND NEEDS**. All architecture, Oliver argued, modern or traditional, western or non-western, formal or informal, is an embodiment of culture and society. Peoples and cultures around the world have developed their own forms of architecture, in line with their own cultural values, needs and expectations.

In his later work, Oliver emphasised how an understanding of the relationship between architecture, culture and society, and a more inclusive approach to architecture, is fundamental for those involved in the field of architecture. In a time of unprecedented population growth,

globalisation and climate change, housing the people of the world is a major challenge; especially in those parts of the world where vernacular architecture is prominent. In his last book, *Built to Meet Needs* (2006), Oliver called on architects to take on a role of '**ENABLERS**', to work in an advisory capacity with local communities to design new housing that supports and enhances existing forms of vernacular architecture. In Oliver's view, such an approach provides the opportunity to deliver culturally appropriate housing, rather than 'the mere provision of roofs and walls'. He reiterated the need to recognise the 'richness, diversity and ingenuity' of the combined architectural heritage of the world; not simply for the sake of conservation, but to **LEARN** from it and build on its accumulated knowledge and wisdom.

OLIVER'S PHOTOGRAPHY

In addition to being a prolific author, Oliver was a keen traveller and photographer. During his career,




Norfolk Terrace Halls of Residence, University of East Anglia, by Sir Denys Louis Lasdun, Norwich, United Kingdom, 1971

he visited more than 70 countries in six continents. Oliver undertook extensive periods of **FIELDWORK** in a range of countries, including the USA, Ghana, Turkey and Costa Rica. Other countries, such as France and Spain, he visited regularly for shorter periods of time. Yet other countries he visited only once or twice, often combining his visits with an attendance at conferences or workshops. Whatever the length or regularity of his travels, Oliver always took the opportunity to study local architectural traditions; many of them, but by no means all, vernacular.

From his earliest travels onwards, Oliver always took photographs of the architecture he visited. In total he took around 25,000 images that capture **LANDSCAPES**, **BUILDINGS** and **ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS** from all around the world. An amateur photographer, he used standard commercial cameras and avoided the use of special lenses, filters or tripods. The vast majority, about 22,500 of the images, consist of 35mm slides; the remainder

are printed photographs. Almost all of the images are in colour. Although the subject of the images was always carefully chosen, Oliver did not spend much time on the actual composition of the images, or on technical details such as lighting conditions. As a result, the images comprise so-called **SNAPSHOTS** rather than perfect images: some appear poorly framed, include people that are only partly in the picture, or are somewhat out of focus.

Because of Oliver's interest in the interrelationship between architecture, culture and society, his photographs often document not just building materials, forms, details or decorations, but also the **PEOPLE** that made, used and lived in the architecture. Furthermore, they do not only document vernacular architecture, but also capture other, more formal, popular and commercial forms of architecture, reflecting his belief that architecture is **FOR ALL**, and **BY ALL**. Altogether, the images constitute an unparalleled record of



**'THERE IS MUCH TO
BE LEARNED FROM THE
WORLD'S ARCHITECTURE**

the world's architecture during the second half of the twentieth century and remind us of the variety of ways in which all cultures around the world continue to express their needs, values and aspirations in architectural form.

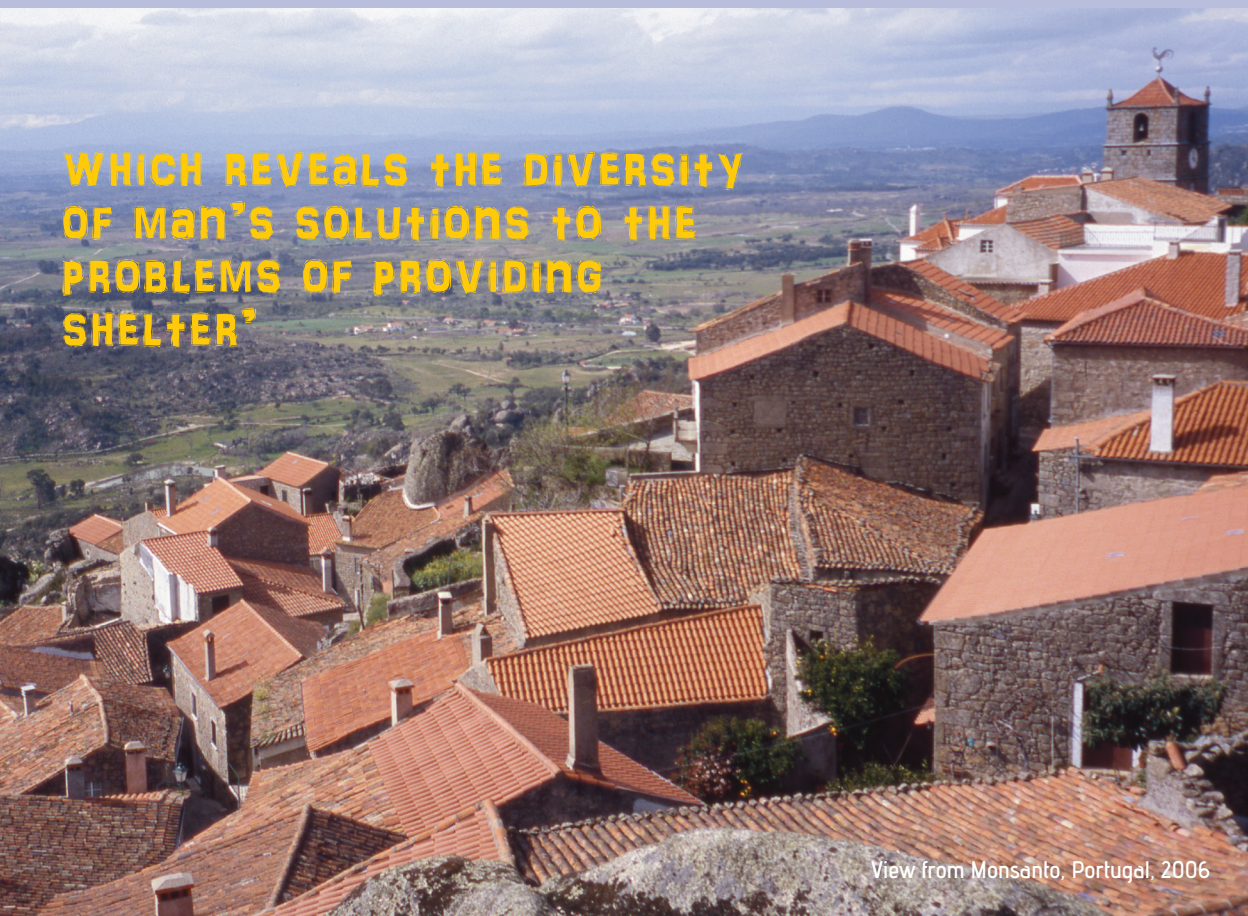
THE PAUL OLIVER VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE LIBRARY

Throughout his career, Oliver built up a personal **COLLECTION** of books, journals, photographs and drawings related to the architectural traditions of the world. In 2006, the Paul Oliver Vernacular Architecture Library (POVAL) was established to administer this unique multi-disciplinary collection. Since 2008, it has been housed as a Special Collection in the Main Library of Oxford Brookes University, where it is accessible to staff, students and visiting scholars from around the world.

From 2012 onwards, with the financial support of the **SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE** at Oxford Brookes University, the 35mm slides in the collection have all been catalogued and digitised. All 22,500 images are stored on Oxford Brookes University's Research Archive and Digital Assets Repository (RADAR). From 2016 onwards they have been **FREELY** available for teaching and research purposes.

A selection of the digitised 35mm slides is included in the exhibition. Depicting landscapes, buildings and architectural details from cultures around the world (monumental and ordinary; traditional and modern; everyday and unique), they aim to capture the scope, diversity and quality of the images in the POVAL collection; to remind us of the extraordinary richness, beauty and tenacity of the architectural heritage of the world; and to **RAISE QUESTIONS** about how we should respond to and may learn from it.

WHICH REVEALS THE DIVERSITY
OF MAN'S SOLUTIONS TO THE
PROBLEMS OF PROVIDING
SHELTER'



View from Monsanto, Portugal, 2006



Text by Marcel Vellinga

Exhibition curated by Molly Franta, Timea Korda-Kovats, Maria Lopez Gonzalez, Seyedehtarisa Hosseini Badakhshani, Anuja Mayadeo, Manalee Nanavati, Rosa Teira Paz, Connor Vellinga, Marcel Vellinga

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From top left to bottom right:
Blackfoot tipis, Mission, British Columbia, Canada, 1979
Corbelled stone trulli, Apulia, Italy, 2001
Windmill, Paros, Cyclades, Greece, probably 1966
Steps, Machu Picchu, Urubamba, Peru, 2000