

Architecture and vernacular architecture

Marcel Vellinga, Oxford Brookes University, UK

Although the interest to architects in what we now call vernacular architecture goes back certainly to the late nineteenth century, the publication that is most commonly credited with putting the subject on the architectural map is Bernard Rudofsky's exhibition catalogue *Architecture without Architects* (1964).¹ The exhibition was shown in New York's Museum of Modern Art from late 1964 until early 1965. Most architects today are familiar with the brief and heavily illustrated book that actually deals with all forms of architecture that have not been designed by architects (including some, such as megalithic monuments, that would not normally be characterised as vernacular). To many working in or associated with the profession, vernacular architecture is equivalent to architecture without architects because it is assumed to have come about without the involvement of design professionals and is thus the supposed result of unselfconscious building practices. This assumption is the main reason why architects distinguish vernacular architecture from architecture – and remains, for most of them, the main reason to be interested in it in the first place.

However, Rudofsky was but one of a long line of architects who, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, admired, wrote about or otherwise reflected on the value of the 'non-pedigreed' buildings that were later to be identified as vernacular architecture. Philip Webb, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier were among those who had already gone there before him. Nevertheless, *Architecture without Architects* undoubtedly contributed to the notably increased interest in vernacular architecture among architects that can be observed from the 1960s onwards. Paul Oliver, for instance, who went on to edit the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (1997) and who, although not an architect himself, spent most of his career working in architecture schools, was directly

influenced by it (Oliver noted how he ‘strongly disagreed with the emphasis on the buildings as art objects’, which he felt was ‘patronising’).² Others working in the discipline must have been influenced by it too, if the number of times the work has been cited in architectural literature is anything to go by.

The fact that the President of the American Institute of Architects unsuccessfully tried to censure *Architecture without Architects* may have played its inadvertent part in raising awareness of the existence of vernacular architecture, but its increased recognition was of course not down to the exhibition only. There were increasing concerns at the time about the loss of regional traditions in many developing countries because of decolonisation, industrialisation and modernisation (concerns that had had also spurred nineteenth century interests in the vernacular of Europe and North America) as well as a growing interest in popular, ordinary and alternative ways of life. These coincided with an array of counterculture and civil rights movements in the developed world that created an historical context in which the study of vernacular architecture, as a more inclusive, less elitist approach to architecture, became interesting, topical and relevant.

The main reason that vernacular architecture has been of interest to architects before and since the publication of *Architecture without Architects* is that it is seen to provide useful lessons to the profession. Unlike historians, folklorists or anthropologists, documentation or cultural analysis is not the main aim of architects interested in vernacular architecture. To most, the vernacular is a source of inspiration, and sometimes for appropriation, as well as a convenient means to critique contemporary architecture. The vernacular is seen to embody qualities that are not, or are no longer, present in contemporary architectural design. Of course, the specific qualities (for example, honesty, locality, identity or authenticity) vary in relation to the dominant concerns of the time. To Victorian Arts and Crafts architects, vernacular architecture embodied pre-industrial skills that had to be preserved and revived; to

twentieth century modernists, it epitomised qualities (such as an immediate relationship between form and function) deemed necessary to create ‘new’ architecture; while to many contemporary architects it embodies the environmental responsiveness needed to adjust to climate change. In all cases, vernacular architecture represents a form of architecture that architects themselves do not directly engage in. It is the architecture of the Other – at times historic, at times primitive, at times common or simply exotic, but never architecture (with a capital ‘A’) as such. The latter remains the exclusive and distinctly different realm of the architect.³

Over the years, architecture’s engagement with the vernacular has rightly received its fair share of criticism. Most notably, it has been criticised for not taking vernacular architecture seriously enough. Despite frequent rhetorical references to its existence, importance and inspirational qualities, it remains little studied in the discipline. Only a small number of architecture schools anywhere in the world teach vernacular architecture. Those architects that have shown a serious interest in the subject, such as Hassan Fathy or Laurie Baker, are much referenced among those working in the field, but are often little known in the field of architecture more generally. Vernacular architecture rarely features in architectural publications. Those publications that do focus on the subject are often rather selective, zooming in on specific features (commonly forms or materials) and drawing on examples that support a specific design agenda. They also often assume an object rather than a process perspective. Although more recent writings by architects have hinted at the emergence of a more holistic and processual approach, it can be argued that as far as the field of architecture is concerned, vernacular architecture, as a static legacy of the past, only exists to affirm the self-consciousness of a discipline that likes to pride itself on its creativity and progress.

¹ Bernard Rudofsky (1964): *Architecture without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

² Paul Oliver (ed.) (1997): *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Marcel Vellinga (2011): 'The End of the Vernacular: Anthropology and the Architecture of the Other'. *Etnofoor* 23, no. 1: 171-192; Robert Brown and Daniel Maudlin (2012): 'Concepts of Vernacular Architecture'. In *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, edited by Christopher G. Crysler, Stephen Cairns and Hilde Heynen, 340-368. London: Sage.