

## THE VERNACULAR, THE INDUSTRIALISED VERNACULAR AND OTHER CONVENIENT MYTHS

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Vernacular methods of building, says the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, are those 'native or peculiar to a particular country or locality' and this appears to have been first applied to cottage building in 1857. In English the word vernacular has its origin in language and refers to one that is native or indigenous to a country or district. The term later became used in connection with custom and with literature.

The idea of a building language which is 'naturally spoken' and comes directly from the cultural situation is not only embedded in the ideals of many an architect but it is, in a different form, favoured by the public at large. The idea that 'unselfconscious' building has advantages which self-conscious building does not have is also a recurring motif to architects. This is perhaps because unselfconscious building is something that, by definition, architects cannot achieve.

With the development of industrialised society has come the notion that architecture and building should be a direct reflection of such pressures and much of the work of the Modern Movement has been concerned to demonstrate this. Implicit in this is the view that the advent of mechanization and mass production will make available ranges of building products which will, through use and time, become more and more refined in this way providing a 'bank' of building components upon which designers or indeed anyone, can draw. In western Europe during the twenties and thirties this developed more as an ideal than as a reality. However, the great cast iron catalogues of the nineteenth century, the development of the steel frame and the American timber frame house have all demonstrated in very real terms the possibility of such an idea. But at no previous period has such an ideal become abstracted and applied to a whole country's building industry, as it has been in Britain and some other western European countries since 1945. The sort of development that industry had demonstrated itself capable of in the United States was already evidence that an industrialised vernacular could exist, and indeed many of the European apologists of mass production drew their inspiration from that source.

In Britain industrialisation developed within an already established culture, albeit changing that culture in the process. In North America, industrialisation has developed integral with the culture itself and the results of this have caused more recent commentators to report on the natural way in which technology is there treated. Impatient with the apparent unresponsiveness of the building industry in Britain, travellers found themselves falling into the more European habit of elaborate theory or concept building around the realities of North American industry. Of course, the United States has not been without its own apostles of the machine from the propositions of Buckminster Fuller to the dimensional practicalities of James Farwell Bemis<sup>1</sup>. Fuller constantly drew attention to the changed circumstances that had been brought about by the increasing facility and speed of transportation. This saw its clearest statement in 'Designing a New Industry' published in 1945/6:

'Even at 300 cubic feet we can get eight packaged houses into a freight car and we can ship by rail to the seaboard - the farthest point in the United States from Wichita, Kansas - for \$75 a house. We can ship economically to any place in the world, because when we get to seaboard the ocean rates are so cheap we can ship to any place in the world for a few hundred dollars total from Wichita'<sup>2</sup>

1. J.F.BEMIS, *The Evolving House*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Technology Press, M.I.T., vols. I-II-III, 1933, 1934, 1936.

2. Quoted in J.MELLER, *The Buckminster Fuller Reader*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

In post 1945 Britain, although the practicalities of such an industrialised vernacular were being worked out in terms of the use of planning grids and ranges of dimensionally related components (by Arcon and the Modular Society), the possibilities were given renewed architectural status by the house built in Santa Monica by Charles and Ray Eames in 1949. The Eames' house demonstrated all the characteristics of the argument for the industrialised vernacular with its use of ranges of industrially produced building components selected straight from the catalogues. This 'catalogue availability' proved a powerful influence on the post war generation of British architects.

For a period, much of the architectural profession in Britain became committed to as total a use of high technology as was possible. A series of building systems for schools, housing and hospitals were created as attempts were made to usher in the new world in an uneasy marriage between the social aims of egalitarianism and high technology. Traditional methods of building were said to be dying, craft work disappearing and any references to 'the vernacular' of a region somewhat reprehensible. As user dissatisfaction grew, and information became available about poor performance, the true first cost and the high maintenance costs of many of the building systems, architects and the industry in Britain began to re-examine traditional building techniques, vernacular methods and the performance of such buildings. Not surprisingly much of merit was found in such an approach - environmental performance was often better than that offered by the new technologies and costs were found to be more economic. Further, there still existed a pool of craft skills and men keen to exercise them. In recent years Britain has seen a welcome resurgence of the use of such skills and many new buildings with very fine brickwork, joinery and so on.

Of course all this has given rise to its own problems since for many architects it is merely a romance with something they call 'the vernacular', with very little thought as to what this actually means. Brickwork, a multiplicity of pitched roofs and small windows characterise this new style and it can be seen in almost every British town and city. It is a style which many British architects of only average ability can use and which produces buildings that are at least inoffensive. This contrasts with the previous use of versions of the International Style which also dot every British town and which show that a great deal more skill and understanding was necessary to make such an approach work. Nevertheless, there is a curious selectivity at work in the emerging attitudes to vernacular methods.

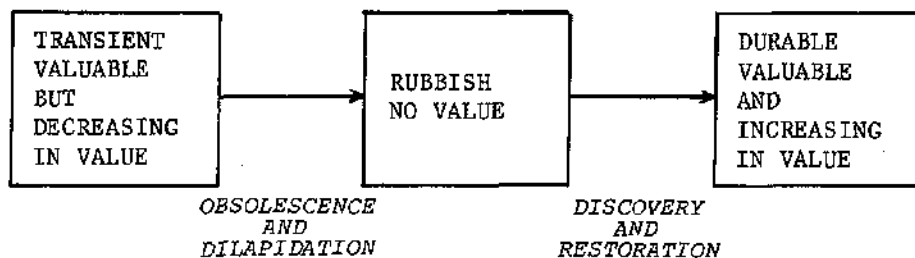
To examine this we must return and ask what is 'the vernacular'? In the past it has clearly been the dominant regional forms and building methods. In all parts of Britain, as in most countries, there are strong regional characteristics which emerge from the culture, climate and available materials. Building in Sussex is different from building in Dorset or that in the Lake District.<sup>3</sup> There is a problem however, for such admired regional characteristics arose from a particular situation; such situations have long since disappeared although some of the methods may have survived. If we actually analyse some regions, some towns or parts of towns we will find that the 'naturally spoken language' of that area is one heartily disliked by most architects. This is the present day 'vernacular' of houses by speculative developers, city councils, oil companies petrol stations, and so on. This constitutes the vernacular of much of western Europe and North America and it does raise interesting and important questions when architects choose to characterise all this as worthless, bad design whilst endeavouring to recall the equally expeditious 'vernacular' style of a previous era. As Seaton<sup>4</sup> has pointed out 'the vernacular is what is convenient and is usually bad'. It is perhaps only with the passage of time that the objects left by a culture are elevated to the status of durable and valued artefacts.

This would accord with the Rubbish Theory of Michael Thompson who has described the process by which objects and ideas can move from the category of being rubbish to that of highly valued art objects.<sup>5</sup>

3. See R. BRUNSKILL, *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture*, London: Faber and Faber, 1976.

4. Dr. R. Seaton, School of Architecture, University of British Columbia, Canada. In seminar at Portsmouth School of Architecture, 1977.

5. M. THOMPSON, *An Anatomy of Rubbish: from junk to antique*, *New Society*, 10th April 1969.



'Low key' is a phrase currently used by many journals and architects in Britain to describe their approach: this attempt to draw on the traditional regional characteristics is however, highly selective and in many ways an international style in its own right since one can see similar buildings in many

6. e.g. R. VENTURI, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972.

countries. Such an approach still often excludes much that the public find satisfactory, in spite of its claims to the contrary. The work of Venturi<sup>6</sup>, once much abused, is now coming to be seen as a possible alternative route for architects—that is one drawing both on the traditions of architecture from a broad historical knowledge and also from popular culture 'as it is spoke'. Of course some critics will draw attention to the fact that much of such popular culture is a created 'demand' having its source in strong pressure groups within (or in some cases outside) a society. It will then be argued that to absorb or accede to such pressures is a diminution of the responsibility of the architect. This in turn raises a central dilemma for architects since their skills derive from a specialized area of knowledge taught in specialised institutions and yet their art is a public art subject to the hard scrutiny of use.

A simple view which describes architects as either manipulators or as the manipulated is no useful contribution to such a discussion. What may be useful is to set out the two poles of a continuum which clarify the position. The two ends of this spectrum are Regional (or local) approaches, and International approaches. Put this simply I think we can all recognise some of the characteristics. Architecture that is at the Regional end will be place-dependent, rooted in the culture, related to the site and place, responsive to climate and custom, and will use local technologies. Architecture which is at the international end of the spectrum will be place-independent, independent of local culture, free of the site, (including surrounding buildings), independent of climate and will employ an international version of high technology.

REGIONAL  
POLE

INTERNATIONAL  
POLE

CULTURE DEPENDENT	CULTURE INDEPENDENT
PLACE DEPENDENT	PLACE INDEPENDENT
RELATED TO SITE	FREE OF SITE
CLIMATE RESPONSIVE	INDEPENDENT OF CLIMATE
LOCAL TECHNOLOGIES	UNRESPONSIVE TO CUSTOM
	NON LOCAL TECHNOLOGIES
	(OFTEN HIGH-TECHNOLOGY)

THE TWO EXTREMES OF THE REGIONAL-INTERNATIONAL CONTINUUM

As architects we undergo a specialised education and are expected to know our subject. This entails being familiar not merely with the buildings in our region or town but acquiring a knowledge of a range of different solutions to building types from historical sources and from throughout the world. Indeed it is a mark of excellence that a student shows a wide knowledge. Students (and architects) will travel the globe to visit the buildings of a favoured architect, and students will see repeated pictures of the same building in books on architecture. In lectures they will be shown slides of buildings accepted as important by the architectural subculture—often these will be the same slides of the same buildings used in different contexts to explain different points. All this adds up to a specialised international knowledge. To be sure there will be regional differences even here in that one school

7. V. IMAMOGLU and E.O. IMAMOGLU, the "Effect of Fame and Nationality of the Architect on the Evaluation of Interiors by Beginner and Advanced Architecture Students", Paper presented to the Architectural Design Conference, Istanbul Technical University, May 1976.

will emphasise some things more than others but the principle holds. An interesting illustration of the effects of such a process on architectural students is to be found in a recent study.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly then such a specialized (yet broad) knowledge will bring a totally different view to bear on a problem than that held by people who know but few buildings of a given type. Further many people, even in this day and age, may have travelled little and therefore their knowledge of other cultural settings is limited.

Inevitably perhaps most architects have tended to operate at the International end of the spectrum. This has always been so, with British architects in the eighteenth century going on the Grand Tour to Italy and more recently architects from all countries going on the Grand Tour to the United States. However, the increased speed of communication and the advent of the International Style has created a particular version of this. Soon after Lever House was built in New York, replicas of it appear in all corners of the globe from Marylebone Road in London (Castrol House) to Atatürk Boulevard in Ankara. So the buildings become independent of place and of regional culture; often of course, such examples are totally inappropriate from a climatic point of view and the original technology is only indifferently emulated. Another characteristic is that many buildings at this end of the spectrum will proclaim their adherence to the International tradition quite literally by being independent of the site-located above it. The Villa Savoie at Poissy (1929/31) by Le Corbusier is the archetype here but the Maison Suisse (1930/32) or the Unite d'habitation (1947/52) are equally good examples.

Since the modern movement began, much of the International Style has been associated with the machine aesthetic, with the utopia of a world wide industrialised vernacular which supposedly transcends regional characteristics. Many buildings actually are designed to look like efficient machines, such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris by Piano and Rogers (1976). However in spite of all claims to the contrary different parts of the globe are still distinctive and it is clear that many of the ongoing traditions, however they have been transformed, bear close examination by architects even though they may not accord with their cherished attachments to the machine and the international industrialised aesthetic. Obviously, long obsolete traditions cannot be recreated, but architects can and must learn from close appraisals of existing working buildings what their qualities are, and what their cultural context is.

8. C.ALEXANDER, S.ISHIKAWA and H.SILVERSTEIN, *Pattern Language*, New York: O.U.P., 1977.

Alexander, in his most recent work, 'A pattern language'<sup>8</sup> points out that every society which is alive and whole, will have its own unique and distinct pattern language; and further, that every individual in such a society will have a unique language, shared in part, but which as a totality is unique to the mind of the person who has it. In this sense, in a healthy society there will be as many pattern languages as there are people - even though languages are shared and similar. The qualities of a good space or a good building reside in the specific way a specific person or group of persons has resolved a particular problem in a given cultural context.

9. A. BALFOUR, *Rockefeller Center*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.

Clearly there are many forces at work in a given society and an architect has to attempt to be both responsive and responsible. A fascinating study of this process at work in a large building complex is given in 'Rockefeller Center: Architecture as Theater'<sup>9</sup>. In the past the pendulum has swung to the International Model; one response to this is to reject all architecture and say that only those buildings made by 'the people' are valid models. But such a model is probably as utopian as the International one. A way forward must lie in a judicious blend of knowledge from both ends of the spectrum - a knowledge that respects both regional cultures and climates but one that can draw on the very wide ranges of possibilities available from other times and other places. Architects have spent many years attempting to devise an architecture of fit: perhaps what we need is an architecture of tolerance.

## YÖRESEL MİMARLIK, SANAYİLEŞMİŞ YÖRE MİMARLIĞI VE ÖTEKİ EFSANELER

### ÖZET

Dilde yöresellik içten gelen, yöreye özgü ve doğal bir niteliklerdir. Mimarlıkta da bu denli içtenlik ve doğallık çoğu tasarımcının düşlediği bir aşama olmuştur.

Sanayileşme sonrasında bu düşler, makineleşme ve dizi yapımla üretilecek çeşitli yapı parçalarından, her tasarımcının -ya da herkesin- gönlünce seçip kullanacağı bir ortam isteğine dönüştü. 19.yüzyılın geniş dökmedemir yapı parçaları katalogları, çelik çerçeveler ve Amerika'nın hazır ahşap konutlarından sonra ise bu istek 1950'lere doğru Avrupa'nın kimi ülkelerinde gerçekleşir gibi oldu. Ancak, bu gelişme sırasında konulan kuramlar gene de Kuzey Amerika'nın gerçekleri üzerine dayandırılıyordu. Kuzey Amerika'daki makineleşmenin, mimarlıkla ilişkiler açısından çeşitli yorumlarını yapan Buckminster Fuller ve James Bemis gibi kendi havarileri gerçi vardı ama konu Charles ve Ray Eames'in 1949'da Santa Monica'da gerçekleştirdikleri konutta sanayileşmiş yöre mimarlığı olarak yeni bir mimari kişilik kazanıyordu ilk kez. Bu örnekle birlikte mimarlar, özellikle de İngiliz mimarları, uğraşlarında en yüksek düzeyde teknoloji kullanmayı uzun süre her tür yapı gereksinimlerinin karşılanmasında tek yön olarak benimsediler. Geleneksel yapı üretim sürecinin artık öldüğü kabulleniliyordu. Ne var ki, bu yeni yapı üretim teknolojisinin ürünlerini kullananlar yakınmaya başladıkça, yapıların düşük edimlerine karşılık yapım ve bakım giderlerinin yüksekliği göze battıkça tasarımcılar geleneksel yapı uygulamalarına yeniden eğildiler.

Geleneksel yapıların üstünlükleri bir kez daha övülür oldu. Ancak, geleneksel-yöresel mimarlığa duyulan bu yeni ilgi çoğunlukla özsüz, yüzeysel bir biçimde yeni yapılaşmayı etkilemekteydi. Bu yeni ilgiden yararlanan orta yetenekte mimarlar ülkenin çeşitli bölgelerinde gelişmiş örneklere fazla aykırı olmayan kötü tasarımlarını müşterilerine rahatça satabildiler. Oysa daha önceki dönemde topluma beğendirilmeye çalışılan 'evrensel akım'ın tasarımları çok daha fazla çaba, bilgi ve yetenek istiyordu.

Bugün Avrupa ve Amerika'da yöre mimarlığından esinlendiği savıyla nice çıkar güdümlü uygulamalar yapılmakta. Ama ancak zaman içinde gerçekten değerli olan yöre mimarlığı örnekleri değerlerini koruyacak ve arttıracaklar. Bu sınava başarıyla vermiş geçmiş dönem yöre mimarlığı örnekleri ise günümüz için doğru mimarlığın oluşmasında öğretici olabilecekler.

Bir zamanlar sarkaç evrensel akım yönünde sallanıyordu. Buna tepki olarak tüm mimarlık akımları ve uğraşılarını yadsıyarak ancak halkın kendi ürettiğinin gerçek mimarlık olduğu da söylendi bir zaman. Şimdi artık belki iki ucu birleştirmek gerekiyor; bir yandan bölgesel kültürler ve iklimsel farklılara saygı duymayı, öte yandan başka zaman ve başka yerlerden alınacak öğretileri değerlendirmeyi birleştirmek.

Mimarlar uzun yıllar mimarlıkta uyum aradılar, belki de mimarlıkta asıl gereken hoşgörüyü.

