

The Contemporary Debate on the Definition of Vernacular Architecture: an overview

Christine Roels

PhD Student in Architecture

Université Libre de Bruxelles, Faculté d'architecture La Cambre Horta

In the following pages, I will try to introduce you to the contemporary academic debate on vernacular architecture. My aim is to provide you with a capacity to understand what 'vernacular architecture' might mean nowadays, as I expect this may sound a little strange to a public unfamiliar with theory of architecture. To do this, I have recollected ideas of the main theorists of the field they have published in scientific journals. I have tried to articulate their ideas and positions on the definition of the term in order to highlight some specificities of the concept of 'vernacular architecture'.

Before wishing you *une bonne lecture*, I would like to remind you that this is a draft paper I wrote especially for the course. It will certainly help me to plan a future chapter of the 'literature review' part of my thesis.

This presentation has also been my second opportunity to write and discuss on my topic, since the beginning of my research program. I had previously only participated to a poster session, at the international Congress of the European Architectural History Network which was held in Brussels, in June 2012. I enclose the documents I presented at this poster session as complements to this paper.

The Vernacular Architecture Forum: a central actor for vernacular architecture studies

Vernacular architecture studies are a field historically appropriated by English speakers. Nowadays, even if scholars worldwide have incorporated the term into their works, the leading centers for research on vernacular architecture are situated in North America. The methodologies, theories, history and results from field works are currently centralized in the Vernacular Architecture Forum. Formed in 1980, this organization is in charge of a journal published through the University of Minnesota Press, annual conferences, awards competitions and educative programs. What concerns defining 'vernacular architecture', its Board invites anyone to enter the discussion on a website page: "Vernacular architecture refers to ordinary buildings and landscapes. The VAF acknowledges that there have been and continue to be debates on defining 'vernacular architecture'."

(Vernacular Architecture Forum official website, vernaculararchitectureforum.org, Learning and Training: "What is Vernacular Architecture?", last updated 01 august 2011, last visit: 09 august 2012). Connected to this organization within the same network, there is the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments of the University of Berkeley. IASTE assumes a clearer definition of the term whereas the VAF is prudent. Following his co-founder Nezar Alsayyad, "Etymologically, (...) it [a vernacular building] must be native or unique to a specific place, produced without the need for imported components and processes built by the individuals who occupy it." (Nezar Alsayyad, 2006, p. 17)

The knowledge on vernacular architecture: an interdisciplinary product

To continue with a description of the actors of this scholar scene, theorists of vernacular architecture were educated in various fields. Obviously, the built environment interest not only architects but

also art historians, geographers and anthropologists – to cite the most recurrent disciplines involved in vernacular architecture studies. What more, the study of a vernacular building would ideally be accomplished by an interdisciplinary team (Vellinga, Oliver, 2006 and Rapoport, 1969). Indeed, the ultimate aim of this kind of research is to understand a built form in what relate it to the epoch that has seen its construction, what relate it to its surrounding environment, what relate it to the people who have built it and live in it. What we could also underline in this objective of vernacular architecture studies is the reason why we cannot actually create categories of research on the basis of the disciplinary origins of scholars. The model of a "Four approaches to vernacular architecture", proposed by the American historian of architecture Dell Upton, is far more explanatory. It is so possible to identify "object-oriented, socially-oriented, culturally-oriented and symbolically-oriented" vernacular architecture studies (Upton, 1983).

Object-oriented studies

This "path of inquiry" was mainly followed in the 18 and 19th centuries by architects and art historians. It was traced by scholars in Decorative Arts under the influence of romantic and scientific movements of thought. They were interested into "historical associations and picturesque visual effects". The point of view is in this case holistic. Precise measures, drawings and statements about details and materials of buildings were what they produced. The legacy of these pioneering vernacular studies is a focus on domestic architecture.

Socially-oriented studies

The premise of these studies is that architectural forms vary with the historical context, social and economic factors. Scholars assume in this case the building is the best evidence to know about aspects of the past. It comes in addition to the documentary studies and involves collecting data on the context of the *building-phase* period like the economic evolution of a region.

Culturally-oriented studies

This approach was framed by the cultural geographers. The main questions are the relation to avant-garde architecture, ethnicity and the process of acculturation, the creation of an architectural type, the variation of forms by considering architecture as a language. The leader of the field, the American folklorist Henry Glassie has developed a theory on how innovation occurs and new ideas are incorporated into 'local tradition' of building by using a structural linguistic approach.

Symbolically-oriented studies

It is about detecting relations within a group of people through elements of architecture: forms, elements of decoration, etc. Dell Upton, who has himself experienced this kind of study, postulates that vernacular builders have to choose a specific architectural vocabulary because they interact within and reinforce by their actions the group in which they live. These studies implicate notions of semiotics of architecture. A building is read as a system of signs and symbols.

The definition of vernacular architecture: an ambiguous term

Vernacular architecture studies are thus realized by several disciplines. The effect of this interdisciplinary dynamic on the definition of the concept of vernacular architecture is an extension of the spectrum of buildings it designates. Indeed, for the scholar Camille Welles, who has made a short history of American vernacular studies in an article for the early version of the VAF's Journal, it has for effect "releasing the term from any particular set of architectural characteristics. (...) By now, it is generally acceptable to define vernacular architecture as common building of any sort." (Welles, 1986, p. 3) For Mike Christenson, only one constant has to be observed in the history of the term: its scholarly use is constantly in imbalance between a synonym of "traditional architecture" and a synonym of "everyday architecture". (Christenson, 2011, p. 2) In his paper for the actual VAF's Journal, Christenson also states that this imbalance has an origin in the official first written use of the term. The first written uses of "vernacular architecture" are dated back to the 19th century for the American scholars (Nezar Alsayyad, Dell Upton for example). As a European scholar, Michelangelo Sabatino recognize in Sir George Gilbert Scott's "Remarks on Secular and

Domestic Architecture” (John Murray, London, 1857) the original appearance of the term, like did Christenson (Christenson, 2011; Sabatino, 2008). About a last point in what concerns Europe, in the Oxford English Dictionary, excerpts from the Scott's book are used to illustrate the definition of the word 'vernacular' when applied to architecture. As Christenson has stated, 'vernacular architecture' was in this book actually signifying “ordinary architecture”, “spontaneous”, “of the everyday” but also “traditional architecture” (Christenson, 2011, p. 1). Sabatino had previously assert: “The subordinate and often times problematic relationship between vernacular buildings and those works by professionally trained architects can be traced back to Sir George Gilbert Scott (1811-78) and his appropriation of the term vernacular from linguistics to describe domestic architecture.” (Sabatino, 2008, p. 8)

Nowadays, what means “vernacular architecture” is not yet arrested once and for all. Nevertheless, in the evolving landscape of its definitions, two tendencies could be identified. On the one hand, some give a definition of it with an emphasis on the process of interpreting the built environment. Simply said, it characterizes “a way to look upon architecture” (publications of Henry Glassie are the main references). In the words of Dell Upton, it turned out to be linked with a legacy of ways to look upon buildings: “When pressed, my preference is to define vernacular architecture not as a category into which some buildings may be fit and others not, but as an approach to architectural studies that complements more traditional architectural historical inquiries.” (Upton, 1983, p. 263) On the other hand, many definitions consist in designating particular buildings. According to the Britain anthropologist Marcel Vellinga, it could also strictly means a category of architecture: the rural architecture of the past. “Vernacular is reified” in the point of view of a scholar like Rice for example. Defending a preservation of vernacular buildings in the UK, he condemns “changes and adaptations as contamination or adulteration” (Vellinga, 2006, p. 929). Among theorists interested in traditional aspects of buildings, Paul Oliver and Marcel Vellinga, his fellow, are the fathers of a “more dynamic approach that explicitly focuses on building traditions rather than buildings.” (Vellinga, 2006/2007, p. 117). Their ideas have already been accepted in the network. Nezar Alsayyad tells that “we must accept that the gradual change that occurs in vernacular architecture over long periods of time is not a result of conservative practices and aesthetics but simply of geographic or economic limitations that cannot be overcome by a segment of the local population of a region.” (Nezar Alsayyad, 2006, p. 17).

The link with architectural history: a concept for a counter-history

As 'vernacular architecture' may be considered as a concept represented by a group of words, it is important to consider what means both of them and especially what is 'architecture' to the eyes of a scholar involved in vernacular architecture studies. Most of the theorists of vernacular architecture presume logic of distinction between buildings, which is best illustrated by a famous quote of the historian of architecture Nikolaus Pevsner in his book of 1960 “An Outline of European Architecture”. He has done in this book a comparison between a cathedral and a bike-shed. For him, the term of architecture is only applicable to the cathedral.

Camille Welles applies this logic. She asserts that ordinary buildings are particularly interesting because of the complex set of information they could transmit about the people who built them. On the same time, she opposes vernacular architecture buildings to “monuments, palaces, cathedrals, the showcase projects of architects” (Welles, 1986, p. 3). She defines the kind of attention always given to these 'great' objects of architecture, which differ from the one accorded to ordinary buildings: “(...) thoughtful attention has always focused on issues of this style, on aesthetics, and on the contributions made by individual designers. Only rarely are these 'great works' subjected to the questions that have come to characterize the best studies of vernacular architecture.” (Welles, 1986, p. 3-4)

As what Dell Upton had observed among his students, some research projects are specifically

“asking about the relationship of vernacular architecture to academic or avant-garde architecture”:
“This issue touches on the very definition of vernacular architecture, since a specification of the relationship has often been built into that definition.” The results of this kind of research permit him to summarize three manners to explain vernacular architecture while keeping the basic idea that it is an 'alter' of the 'true' architecture: “Some people have conceived of vernacular architecture as imitative, in an inferior, old-fashioned, or "provincial" way, of elite forms. Others have seen it as competitive with, and ultimately the victim of, high-style architecture. Still others have depicted vernacular architecture as a kind of spontaneous or "natural" architecture that has no relationship to academic styles.” (Upton, 1983, p. 271)

The response of Henry Glassie has been decisive in this debate, to the point of view of Dell Upton. It gives a totally different perspective to the suggestion that vernacular architecture is an imitative form of elite architecture: “Henry Glassie has been the leader in rethinking this problem. In a series of essays he has pointed out that there was a change in the very structure of Euro-American cognition in the eighteenth century (in America), one that he has called, for convenience, Georgianization. This change was marked by a transition from a preference for symmetrical, organic forms, to forms that were rigidly symmetrical and tightly controlled. Both traditional and high-style buildings were transformed by this deep alteration in "mindset", which was related in complex and not yet clearly understood ways to the "Great Transformation" in other aspects of western life over which historians have been puzzling for so long. Glassie has gone on to suggest that vernacular builders had a distinctive way of seeing that allowed them to rethink high-style elements and to incorporate them into their buildings in their own manner, within the cognitive framework provided by the Georgian mindset. Glassie's elegant formulation of the concept of Georgianization has been accepted as a basic tool in most culturally oriented studies of vernacular architecture in recent years.” (Dell Upton, 1983)

The link to objects of architecture: a determinant aspect of the concept

At the difference with concepts of other field - political or social -, vernacular architecture is basically related to a single - and quite easily identifiable - act in the real world, which is the one of building. This could imply that its meanings evolve with the transformations which occur in the built environment. Marcel Vellinga, has used the theory referred to Wolff of "a name, a thing" in order to express this idea. For 'object-oriented' studies or 'antiquarians', "a name becomes a thing" and they generally locked it to rural ancient buildings. For the culturally-oriented studies or anthropologists, the "thing" is flexible enough to be extended to 'all' kinds of architecture possible while keeping the "name" remained. (Vellinga, 2006, p. 88)

Now that we have point out the dependence of the term 'vernacular architecture' with the objects that it designates, we have to take into consideration a fundamental characteristic of architectural objects, which is the variation of scale. Uses of the term vernacular architecture are broadly applied to individual buildings (Nezar Alsayyad, 2006, p. 17). The notion of scale is quite determinant in the sense that the concept of regionalism is applied to housing complex, not vernacular. If scholars talks about regional architecture, it generally implies that the building into question is an element of a bigger architectural region.

Finally, a last aspect, inherent of interpretative processes, seems particular of vernacular studies and very decisive in the comprehension of the relation of 'vernacular architecture' to its objects. Dell Upton: “Artifacts are inherently more powerful than words. To see an aesthetic or a social vision realized in the material world is to be captured by it, to lose one's grip on alternative possibilities.” “Unfortunately for vernacular architecture and other material culture scholarship, this spellbinding quality of objects has too often resulted in essays that have been purely descriptive. We have been overpowered by our subject matter. We have not been able to find verbal concepts equal to the

things themselves, and few material culture studies have progressed much in quality, methodology, or analytical depth beyond those of the founding fathers and mothers of the late nineteenth century.” (Dell Upton, 1983, p. 279)

By way of conclusion

Vernacular architecture historians worry about finding the best methods, questions, vocabularies which enable them to capture and render the complex 'thing' that results from the act of building. We could remark in the end that it is buildings with no pretention to intellectual dimension - no avant-garde buildings - that have made possible a prosperous development of an important concept to understand the built environment. Vernacular architecture represents different kinds of buildings, a network of researchers, a challenge for the classical history of architecture, a specific regard on the material world. Nevertheless, despite all of these aspects, the opinion that vernacular is strictly equivalent to ancient-rural-traditional-local architecture is widespread. Conceptual history tools may be helpful to shed a light on these ignored aspects of vernacular architecture and seriously present it as a concept - what it is, I suggest. Furthermore, conceptual history may diminish the value of an old-farmhouse-like identity of vernacular architecture. It, simply but pertinently, offers a different point of view on this question: if anthropologists are currently asking about methods or widening the range of buildings which could enter in the category of the 'vernacular thing', a conceptual history of the term may just demonstrate that the matter is more diversified than describing farmhouses. I will also add that it may demonstrate that 'vernacular architecture' is different from 'rural architecture'...

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Is Vernacular Architecture Dead? News. Grow Your Business. It is an indication that today's definition of "vernacular" might extend beyond form and materiality to encompass program and functionality. Groundbreaking for the project is anticipated by late fall of 2018, with completion scheduled for 2021. The "inverted stoop" at the Studio Museum. Rendering: Courtesy of Adjaye Associates. Israeli architect Asaf Gottesman, founder of Gottesman Architecture, a new firm dedicated to architecture-led developments, also believes vernacular architecture is alive and well. "We work in many countries, the majority in Europe, and though architectur...