

CHANGING VERNACULAR

A Talk with Thomas Carter, President of Vernacular Architecture Forum

Interviewed by Catherine Lavoie of the Historic American Buildings Survey
and Beth Savage of the National Register of Historic Places

Vernacular Architecture Forum, now in its 25th year, has been instrumental in defining what constitutes historical significance. VAF is both an organization and a discussion group, says forum president Thomas Carter, associate professor of architectural history at the University of Utah and director of its College of Architecture and Planning's Western Regional Architecture Program. "Our meetings immerse members in vernacular environments of all kinds, old-timey and up-to-date. We fight the misperception that we're only about the rural and the pre-industrial." The forums are like "conversations," he adds. "We tour, we talk, look at buildings, give lectures, experience the landscape of the meeting site. We interact with the place. We're in Tucson next, then New York, probably going to the Lower East Side and Harlem. Vernacular architecture comes in many forms, from subway stations to skyscrapers to the enduring row house." Here Carter reflects on the past and future on the occasion of VAF's anniversary.

Right and opposite: Savannah's porches. Regional variation is a hallmark of vernacular architecture.



"A SOUTHERN PLANTATION IS MORE THAN A BIG HOUSE; IT'S ALSO THE SLAVE QUARTERS, THE WORK AREAS, AND EVEN THE FARAWAY MARKETS. THE STUDY OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IS REALLY A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE APPROACH TO THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT—ONE THAT STARTS WITH COMMON BUILDINGS BUT INCLUDES THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY OF BUILDINGS."

Q: Can you talk a bit about the state of vernacular architecture studies today?

A: It's in transition, I believe, with some self-esteem problems. Folklore, my original discipline, went through a similar stage. It started out as this grassroots movement, to bring the common people into the discourse. Then it came to be seen as backward looking, cut off from the mainstream, essentially irrelevant to the contemporary discussion. So the folklorists decided, okay, we'll broaden our appeal. We'll study all kinds of behaviors, not just traditional behavior. And the field lost its identity. What's a folklorist? The American Folklore Society just met here in Salt Lake City and I didn't recognize very many of the topics. It was really a meeting about popular everyday culture, which is fine, but it makes it hard to define the field as folklore.

Anyway, that's where the forum is right now. On the one hand we don't want to be marginalized into the "pre-industrial" camp. On the other we don't want to give up who we are, our identity. I'm always worrying, and maybe for nothing. But I do think we're facing a time of change in the field and the organization.

Q: Actually, you seem pretty well grounded in both the old and the new. How is vernacular architecture defined, traditionally speaking?

A: Vernacular architecture is a thing and a field, a type of architecture and an area of study with a very specific research method. It's not something you can define simply. Today, we use the definition from Eric Mercer's *English Vernacular Houses*, published in the 1970s: the common architecture at a given place and time. But that opens up a series of issues.



TRENDLINE

A life expressed in structures. **Below left:** St. Stephen's Slovak Catholic Church and surrounding neighborhood in Johnstown, Pennsylvania's Cambria City historic district. **Center:** Houses in Cambria for employees of the local iron company. **Mill towns, like other architectural communities, consist of many kinds of buildings; vernacular research often centers on spatial and stylistic comparisons of workplaces, manager and worker housing, and religious, recreational, commercial, and public centers.** **Top right:** Ward Avenue United Presbyterian Church in Altoona, Pennsylvania. **Bottom right:** Lleswyn Station, at one time the Altoona stop on the electric railway.



The first, of course, is that you have to clarify what you mean by common. We're always fighting with this idea of the ordinary versus the extraordinary. "Common" is better because it has a numerical connotation. "Common" as it relates to a community. Not ordinary in appearance, but encountered frequently.

And as part of that idea you have to deal with boundaries. You say these are the common buildings. But then you say, well, when and where? In the 1860s, a highly decorated, asymmetrical Victorian building would be eccentric and novel, very different, very avant garde. You'd walk down the street and go wow, what's that? Because most buildings were neoclassical and symmetrical. By the 1880s, the Victorian was incredibly common, found all over. It was the new vernacular, the new language.

Why do buildings become common? Because they are good solutions for people. People make decisions about certain forms and layouts. These choices get repeated. So there's a pattern of behavior that surfaces in a pattern of building. And that's the second part of the definition. You have a strong, visible community identity, a connection between buildings, people, and place.

The third part of the definition centers on the basic goal of vernacular architecture studies, which is understanding communities

through their buildings. To understand what's common in a community, however, you also have to understand what's uncommon. And this brings me to the fourth part: context. What are the differences between, let's say, vernacular buildings and high-style buildings? You must look at them together, in relationship. For example, a southern plantation is more than a big house; it's also the slave quarters, the work areas, and even the faraway markets. The study of vernacular architecture is really a cultural landscape approach to the built environment—one that starts with common buildings but includes the entire community of buildings.

Q: Has your perception gotten highly sensitized over time? Do you immediately see the patterns in a town you've never been before?

A: Yes, indeed. I mean, that's what so wonderful about this approach. You can go into any community with it. And your geographical area doesn't have to be a town. It could be all the Quaker meetinghouses on the eastern seaboard. So yes, I'm highly sensitized. In fact, sometimes I get locked into it.

In every community, I look first for the big houses. Then I look for a collection of buildings that all look the same. Then I look for the work zones, the commercial zones. I start seeing things as collec-



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tions of interrelated buildings, which is the key to getting beyond descriptive representation. You see a part of town with all the mansions, then down by the tracks a bunch of small houses. You start wondering, who's working for whom? What are the sources of income? It opens up a sea of questions.

Q: Does the forum endorse any particular methods of documentation?

A: The method speaks to the need for a lot of fieldwork. I often say to my students, "We're studying buildings that haven't been studied before. We can't do that in a library." The technique is almost archeological. That means going into the field. That's easy for some and hard for others.

Obviously, you can get to architecture in a lot of ways. I stress fieldwork in my program, but it's mostly because in the West so little is known, there are all these

buildings that no one's studied. Buildings are interesting and we're drawn to them. But they're engines of culture too. Our main concern is using buildings to get to ideas, to get to the intentions of the people who produced them. For me, that's the essence of the field. We're interested in common people, the people who left few records accessible through statistics and the census and things like that. We're interested in what buildings tell us about ordinary, everyday life.

Of course, there's always the danger of connoisseurship, where you document well, but all you do is differentiate between the authentic and the non-authentic, the real and the remodeled. Your investigation ends there. We go beyond that. I probably didn't answer your question.

Q: It answers the question in part. But it's a good segue. What prompted the creation of the forum 25 years ago?

A: The forum grew out of the populist movement of the 1960s and '70s, which was pervasive in American studies, a reaction to the fact that traditional history had left most people out. Where are the women? Where are the African Americans? You saw a groundswell of interest in ordinary life and it dribbled over into architecture.

A second impetus was the publicly funded preservation surveys, which truly opened up the world of vernacular architecture.

Q: Financial support was a big issue. You've got to pay the rent, right?

A: That was the thing. It's astounding how many of the early forum members were working in preservation jobs. Across the country, survey money from the federal Historic Preservation Fund was channeled into state historic preservation offices. A lot of young architectural historians, or folklorists pretending to be architectural historians like myself, got hired for survey work. Really, that's how



most of the fieldwork was done. I think many people are still writing from that research, their careers still based on it. In 1980, of course, the survey money disappeared.

For awhile, though, there was a wonderful synergy between this interest in common things and all of a sudden people getting paid to go out and look at them. What I find amazing is that when we got out there nobody knew what to do. We looked at the survey handbooks and none of the buildings were in it. So we formed our own typologies. Ultimately, many of the surveyors went into the academy. As soon as they did that, they got stuck in their office grading papers.

Today, something is missing. Preservation surveys have largely been taken over by cultural resource management companies. Now it's just a job. There's not the engagement with the academic part that there once was.

Q: It's a factor of outsourcing. It's become production work.

A: Yeah, the spirit is just not there. It's been institutionalized.

Q: Was the forum launched in reaction to the Society of Architectural Historians? How would you compare the missions of the two organizations?

A: Well, these oppositions aren't necessarily good for the field. But, looking back, within the larger world of architectural history there was little interest in this material, in what wasn't monumental or connected with a well-known architect. Basically people were out there looking at this ordinary stuff and had no place to talk about it. The forum came in response to that need. The society has changed considerably, and I think that has a lot to do with the forum's work. You know, we opened them up, and the National Register of Historic Places too, to buildings of all kinds.

“ANTHONY KING AND OTHER SCHOLARS HAVE LOOKED AT GLOBALIZATION AS IT RELATES TO COLONIALISM. MY RANCHING STUDY FITS THIS MODEL, AS IT RAISES THE QUESTION OF VIEWING THE WEST AS AN AMERICAN COLONY. MY POINT IS THAT, IF YOU GET BEYOND THE BUILDINGS AND THE HIERARCHIES OF SPACE, WHICH ARE EVERYWHERE, IT OPENS UP A LARGER DISCOURSE.”

Below and opposite: Function and fancy on the frontier. Buildings in Alaska’s Skagway historic district convey both the freedom and the hard reality of the Gold Rush experience.



ABOVE AND LEFT: JET LOWE/NPS/HABS

Q: One of the forum’s founding members suggested recently that perhaps the group may have outlived its usefulness, a victim of its own success. Do you agree with that assessment?

A: No. We may need a transfusion of energy. After a period of time, every group needs to reassess its direction.

We might lack a little bit of the original vigor, but like I said, you don’t want to lose your identity. I don’t think we want to abandon our commitment to common places. We do have to embrace the realities of globalization, and try to see how the North American vernacular fits into the larger economic and cultural framework. And we should push beyond looking at individual buildings, stop isolating parts of the landscape, and use the new theories so important in archeology and literary criticism. The postmodern movement really has not penetrated our organization. There’s all of this other stuff going on out there and we should be part of it, not just rest on our laurels.

For instance, I’ve been studying corporately owned cattle ranches in Nevada. There’s a hierarchy on the ranch among management, horse work—cowboys, buckaroos—and ranch work—the haying and the irrigating. There’s segregation in the architecture. The different groups live in different parts of the ranch and in different grades of houses. The order goes from management, to buckaroos, to field hands. And you can’t ignore the fact that the owner lives in San Francisco in a house on Nob Hill. He owns two million acres in northern Nevada—which are run by a manager.

Anthony King and other scholars have looked at globalization as it relates to colonialism. My ranching study fits this model, as it raises the question of viewing the West as an American colony. My point is that, if you get beyond the buildings and the hierarchies of space, which are everywhere, it opens up a larger discourse.

We need to make sure that we don’t have blinders on to other aspects of the world. Common buildings are common because they’re part of communities. To see the community values, we need to see them in relationship to the overall cultural system.

Q: Closing comments?

A: We’ve gotten very good at what we do, but the passion needs to be rekindled. We need to plug into the larger movement of studies of everyday life. We’re in danger of falling into the antiquarian tradition we reacted against. We want to celebrate our past, not be bound by it. Yet I fear we’re becoming the establishment. Isn’t that ironic? I took this presidency job because I thought I could cause trouble. I’m smart enough to undo things, but not to do them up again. I’m counting on my friends to help me.

Catherine Lavoie and Beth Savage are on the board of directors of Vernacular Architecture Forum. For more information, contact Vernacular Architecture Forum, c/o Gabrielle Lanier, P.O. Box 1511, Harrisonburg, VA 22803-1511, www.vernaculararchitectureforum.org.

L'hermitage plantation

Investigating a Landscape of Pain at Monocacy National Battlefield by Joe Baker

