

“From the unknown to the known”: Transitions in the architectural vernacular

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Published in *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*, v. 18, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 1-13

In practice a great many scholars, when they speak of the vernacular, mean the old, the rural, and the domestic. But this definition, while it identifies an important segment of the ordinary built world, also leaves much out. Is there not vernacular architecture in the present? Is it all from historical periods? Is there no vernacular architecture in urban areas? And what about stores, warehouses, churches, depots, stables, workshops, commercial strips, suburban tracts, and other commonplace environments? Are they not elements of the vernacular?

— Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (1986)

Vernacular architecture is now the term most widely used to denote indigenous, tribal, folk, peasant, and traditional architecture . . . Distinctions can be made between formal, architect-designed architecture and vernacular architecture, and between these and what may be termed popular architecture.

— Paul Oliver, *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (1997)

When we isolate from the world a neglected architectural variety and name it vernacular, we have prepared it for analysis. The term marks the transition from the unknown to the known.

— Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture* (2000)

The contemporary ambiguity in the term “vernacular architecture” is easily traceable to the book in which it is widely believed to have first appeared in print.¹ In reading Sir George Gilbert Scott’s *Remarks on Secular and Domestic Architecture*, published in 1857, it may appear that Scott had in mind an exclusive synonymy between “vernacular

architecture” and “everyday,” “spontaneous,” or “ordinary architecture.” Consider, for example, Scott discussing the economy inherent in contemporary 1850s cornice making, upon which he comments in the present tense that, “in this respect our ordinary vernacular housebuilders are more correct in their practice than our architects.”² Or again, when Scott directs his readers to “look at the vernacular cottage-building of the day . . . the spontaneous productions of our builders, where no external influence is brought to bear upon them.”³ However, Scott’s book also tends in places to confound the usage of “vernacular” with “traditional,” as when he states, “It is not, however, a part of my mission to shew [sic] how the vernacular classic styles are to have new blood thrown into them.”⁴

Since Scott wrote his *Remarks*, scholars have contested the precise meaning of the term “vernacular architecture” even while acknowledging its instability.⁵ The continuing instability is a direct consequence of the built environment’s inability to sustain in a consistent or logical way the intersecting and overlapping interests of diverse scholarly disciplines. Scholars in geography, anthropology, archeology, folklore, landscape architecture, planning, photography, as well as in architecture have over the past century and a half brought to bear divergent and often conflicting approaches to the study of built work described by each in turn as “vernacular architecture.”⁶ Limiting the literature review to scholarly works expressly addressed to architects or architectural

* This is the first page of the author’s version of the published paper.