Vernacular building: past, present and future

Vernacular buildings comprise 99% of the buildings of the world. They are those buildings which spring from local custom and practice, that are usually not the result of what we today consider to be mainstream architectural practice. They include the stone villages of the Alps, the pueblos of the American southwest, the subterranean courtyard houses of China, 19th century workers' housing in England, villages of the Greek islands, squatter settlements in South America and India, the suburbs of America.

The fact that the vernacular is so ordinary and pervasive is itself a good reason to study it. It also provides powerful insights into fundamental issues of architecture. Its study provides insights into architectural form and typology, the building process, the relationship between buildings and human activity, the connection of buildings to geography, the ways in which material culture expresses social and cultural values.

This course uses a survey of various traditions of vernacular building as a means to understand theoretical frameworks dealing with the nature, diffusion and transformation of architectural type; the formal, functional and aesthetic content of vernacular building; the relationship between craft, the building process and the making of places; and the continuities between the vernacular and the professional world of architects.

Particular emphasis will be given to the future of vernacular building, looking at modern processes of design and production which can make healthy buildings and environments in large numbers, suited to people's lives and fostering a future of cultural and environmental sustainability, for the growing cities and suburbs of the world.

The approach to be taken, therefore, is not one in which vernacular architecture is seen as a "style", but in which it is seen as a means for a culture and the people within it to participate fully in the ongoing creation of their world.

This is a lecture/seminar, in which students are encouraged to participate. Three of the classes will be replaced by discussion sessions, in which the instructor will meet with smaller groups to encourage as much discussion as possible.
Readings
A course reader will be available, and various books put on reserve in the AAA Library. These readings will include selections from among the following works, and others:

- Linda Clarke, *Building Capitalism*
- Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture*
- Howard Davis, *The Culture of Building*
- Paul Oliver, *Dwellings: The House across the World*
- Dell Upton, ed., *Common Places*
- Roxana Waterson, *The Living House*

Student requirements/grading criteria are as follows, in addition to lecture attendance and completion of the readings:

- In-class midterm exam. 35%
- Class project. 45%
- Participation in discussion sessions 20%

Tentative class schedule follows. The actual schedule may vary somewhat depending on class discussion, etc.

**Week 1**
**Tuesday.** Introduction: basic ideas of vernacular building and building cultures
**Thursday.** Application of basic concepts to "primitive" building traditions; approaches to form and function in vernacular building. Type: configuration, meaning, and function.

**Week 2**
**Tuesday.** Courtyard buildings of the Mediterranean I (type and structure)
**Thursday.** Courtyard buildings of the Mediterranean II (urban formation and variation). Collective form and the idea of process.

**Week 3**
**Section time to be determined.** DISCUSSION 1: Collective process and the vernacular
**Thursday.** India and Nepal: traditional villages and cities.

**Week 4**
**Tuesday.** Greece. The variety of Greek traditions; northern Greece hybrids.
**Thursday.** MIDTERM EXAM.

**Week 5**
**Tuesday.** The urban vernacular of Venice, Florence and Rome
**Thursday.** Wood traditions of eastern Europe and Scandinavia; the merchant's house of northern and eastern Europe

**Week 6**
**Tuesday.** Wood traditions of Japan: farmhouses and shophouses
**Thursday.** England and New England: villages and village buildings

**Week 7**
**Tuesday.** 18th and 19th century London, and the development of modern building practice
**Section time to be determined.** DISCUSSION II: The culture of building.

**Week 8**
**Tuesday.** Form and process in the contemporary city.
**Thursday.** New ideas about vernacular process: contemporary projects in housing and settlements in developing countries. Initiatives in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, South Africa.

**Week 9**
**Tuesday.** New ideas about vernacular process: contemporary projects in housing and settlements in the developed world. Initiatives in Europe and North America.
**Section time to be determined.** DISCUSSION: the architect's role in the development of contemporary vernacular building.

**Week 10**
**ARCHITECTURE DEPARTMENT FINAL REVIEWS-NO CLASS**

**Week 11**
**PROJECT PRESENTATIONS**
Tentative schedule and reader

**Week 1**
**Tuesday, Jan. 7.** Introduction: basic ideas of vernacular building and building cultures

**Thursday, Jan. 9.** Application of basic concepts to "primitive" building traditions; approaches to form and function in vernacular building. Type: configuration, meaning, and function.

**Week 2**
**Tuesday.** Courtyard buildings of the Mediterranean I (type and structure)

**Thursday.** Courtyard buildings of the Mediterranean II (urban formation and variation). Collective form and the idea of process.

**Week 3**
**Section time to be determined.**

**DISCUSSION 1:** Collective process and the vernacular

**Thursday.** India and Nepal: traditional villages and cities.

**Week 4**
**Tuesday.** Greece. The variety of Greek traditions; northern Greece hybrids.

**Thursday.** The urban vernacular of Venice, Florence and Rome.
- Ron Walkey, "Order from experience, order from rule: the building guilds versus neoclassicism in 19th century Greece." unpublished ms.
- Richard Goy, *Venetian Vernacular Architecture: Traditional Housing in the Venetian Lagoon*. Chapter 8, "The city palazzo-fontego: its structure and appearance"

**Week 5**
**Tuesday.** MIDTERM EXAM

**Thursday.** Wood traditions of eastern Europe and Scandinavia; the merchant's house of northern and eastern Europe

**Week 6**
**Tuesday.** Wood traditions of Japan: farmhouses and shophouses

**Thursday.** England and New England: villages and village buildings
Chapter 1, “Typology, cosmology and construction methods,” pp. 1-44.


Week 7
Tuesday. 18th and 19th century London, and the development of modern building practice

Section time to be determined.

DISCUSSION II: The role of construction.


• Howard Davis, The Culture of Building, chapter 8, "Agreements, contracts and control"

Week 8
Tuesday. Form and process in the contemporary city.

Thursday. New ideas about vernacular process: contemporary projects in housing and settlements in developing countries. Initiatives in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, South Africa, Latin America.

• Howard Davis, The Culture of Building, chapter 10, "Shaping buildings and cities", pp. 219-240

• Howard Davis, The Culture of Building, chapter 11, "Postindustrial craftsmanship," pp. 245-268


Week 9
Tuesday. New ideas about vernacular process: contemporary projects in housing and settlements in the developed world. Initiatives in Europe and North America.

Section time to be determined.

DISCUSSION: the role of the architect in the development of vernacular building.
