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## Vernacular Architecture Forum Syllabus Exchange



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**institution:** Washington & Lee University  
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Art 304

## **Seminar in Vernacular Architecture**

Fall, 2000

Pamela Simpson (Washington & Lee University)

The Course:

In the next twelve weeks we will explore the relatively new field of vernacular studies. Our emphasis will be on approaches, questions, and methods since there is no set "canon" of material that would constitute all you need to know about common building. Indeed, there is no set definition of what constitutes "vernacular architecture." But we will explore some of the possibilities and in the end you should have an understanding of various approaches to the analysis of the built environment and some of the ideas that can result from such an analysis.

Grading

You will be graded on class participation, 10%; seven short paper assignments 20%; a mid-term exam, 20%; a research paper on a building (oral presentation, 15% and written paper 15%) = 30%; and a final exam 20%.

Class Schedule:

Sept. 7 Introduction, Outline and Assignments

Reading Assignments: Upton and Vlach, Introduction to Common Places and Fred Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," in Common Places, pp. 3-26.  
Read for Sept 12.

Assignment One: Write a short, two or three page description of your room. Think of yourself as someone in the distant future who is doing field work on the late 20th c. and suddenly finds this perfectly preserved room from 1999! Describe it and try to explain the social living patterns that are evident in it. Due in class on Sept 12.

Sept. 12 Discussion of assignments and Guest Lecture,

Catherine Stroh, University Archaeologist

Sept. 14 Field Trip to the Museum of Frontier Culture in Staunton

Assignment Two: Write a two or three page analysis of the Museum of Frontier Culture. What is the museum trying to do? What are its methods? What assumptions are being made in the presentation? Is it successful? What problems do you see in its approach? Assignment due in class Sept. 19.

Sept. 19 Discussion of assignment, Lecture: Building in Wood

Reading Assignments: Fred Kniffen and Henry Glassie, "Building in Wood in the Eastern United States: A Time-Place Perspective," in *Common Places*, pp. 159-181. (Read For Sept. 19)

Sept. 21 Lecture: Building in Brick; walking tour of Lexington

Reading Assignments: Harley J. McKee, "Brick and Stone: Handicraft to Machine," in Charles E. Peterson, ed., *Building Early America*, pp. 74-95; Simpson, "The Molded Brick Cornice in the Valley of Virginia," *APT Bulletin*, 1980. (on reserve) (Read for Sept 21)

Sept. 26 Field Trip, An Exercise in Recording Buildings.

Reading Assignment: Excerpts from Gabrielle Lanier and Bernard Herman, *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic*, 1997, pp. 4-7 and 316-350. (Read for Sept. 26)

Assignment Three: Divide into teams to record the buildings on the field trip. Due in class, Sept 28. Handout will detail requirements.

Sept 28 Discussion of Exercise,

Lecture: House Forms and Ethnicity

Reading Assignments: Edward Chappell, "Acculturation in the Shenandoan Valley: Rhenish Houses in the Massanutten Settlement," *Common Places*, pp. 27-57, John M. Vlach, "The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy," in *Common Places*, pp. 58-78, and Dell Upton, *Architectural Roots*, (on reserve) Read Introduction and at least two of the sections. (Read for Sept. 28)

Assignment Four: In *Roots*, read about your own ethnic architectural forms, or those you find interesting, and write a summary that compares the architectural forms of two different groups. Due Oct 3

Oct 3 Discussion of *Roots* assignment; Lecture: Acculturation

Oct 5 Lecture: Public and Private Spaces

Reading Assignments: Dell Upton, "Anglican Parish Churches in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Virginia," in Camille Wells, ed., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture II*, pp. 90-101 (on reserve), Kenneth L. Ames, "Meaning in Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America," in *Common Places*, pp. 240-260. (Read for Oct. 5)

Oct 12-13 University Reading Days, Meeting of Southeast Society of Architectural Historians on Campus.

This is your chance to attend a professional meeting. You are invited to attend all the sessions and especially encouraged to attend the keynote speaker, Carol Lounsbury, on Thursday evening and the Jefferson panel on Friday afternoon. These are noted scholars in the field. In addition you are invited to participate in the Saturday tours of the Jefferson sites. I have grant money to subsidize your participation. If you would like to attend the lunches or dinner on Thursday or Friday, I will have to ask for you to pay for that, but the talks are all free for you and so is the bus trip Sat.

Assignment five: You are required to attend at least one of the SESAH sessions (see schedule) and write a summary of the papers you heard. Summarize their arguments, approaches and conclusions and give your own evaluation of whether or not they were effective. Due Oct 17.

Oct 17 Discussion of SESAH Meeting; individual meetings to discuss your building research

Oct 19 Mid Term Exam

Oct. 24 Ideology and Space Arrangement

Reading Assignment: Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art As Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1978, pp. 28-51, (on reserve, read for Oct. 24).

Assignment Six: Write an analysis of space use patterns and their possible meanings for your own home. Include floor plans, diagrams of space use, hierarchies of space, different rituals of behavior, different patterns of use for family versus strangers, etc. Due Oct. 26.

Oct. 26 Discussion of assignment; Lecture: Social Space

Reading Assignments: Dell Upton, "Black and White Landscapes in Eighteenth Century Virginia," in Robert St. George, *Material Life* (on reserve); Robert St. George, "TSet Thine house in OrderU: The Domestication of the Yoemanry in Seventeenth Century New England," in *Common Places*, pp. 336-364; Betsy Cromley, "A History of American Beds and Bedrooms," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, IV, pp. 177-186 (on reserve, read for Oct 26).

Oct 31 Field Trip to Stonewall Jackson House

Assignment Seven: Write a short two or three page analysis of your visit to the Jackson House. Consider their purpose, their method of presentation, their assumptions, their success and possible problems. Due Nov. 2.

Nov. 2 Discussion of SJH visit;

Lecture: Separate Spheres, Gender and Space

Reading Assignment: Angel Kwolek-Folland, "Gender as a Category of Analysis in Vernacular Architecture Studies," in Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, V, ed. Elizabeth Cromley and Carter Hudgins, pp. 3-10. And Elizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885-1915," in Common Places, pp. 261-278 (read for Nov. 2).

Nov. 7 Lecture: Popular Culture, Bungalows and Mail Order Houses

Reading Assignments: Clay Lancaster, "The American Bungalow," in Common Places, pp. 79-106.

Nov. 9 Lecture: Changes in Everyday Life: New Materials

Field Trip, Visit exhibit, Rockbridge Historical Society

Reading Assignments: Pam Simpson, "Quick, Cheap and Easy: The Early History of Concrete Block Building," in Perspectives III (on reserve); "Quick, Cheap and Easy, Part II: Pressed Metal," in Gender, Space and Shelter (on reserve); and "Democratic Floors and Walls: Linoleum and Lincrusta," in Everyday Landscapes (on reserve, read for Nov. 9).

Nov. 14 New Building Types, Automobiles and the Miracle Mile

Reading Assignment: Barbara Rubin, "Aesthetic Ideology and Urban Design," in Common Places, pp. 482-507 (read for Nov. 14).

Nov. 16 Housing the Middle Class

Reading Assignment: Fred Peterson, "Vernacular Building and Victorian Architecture: Midwestern American Farm Homes," in Common Places, pp. 433-446 and Alan Wallis, "House Trailers: Innovation and Accommodation in Vernacular Housing," in Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture III, pp. 28-43 (read for Nov. 16).

No Class, Thanksgiving Vacation Nov. 21 and 23

Nov. 28 Film, Kostoff, The House, and discussion

Nov. 30 Edible Architecture: Corn Palaces and Butter Sculpture

Dec. 5 and 7 In class presentations of your papers

Final Exam

## Text Book

- John Michael Vlach and Dell Upton, *Common Places, Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*. It is available in the bookstore and there is a copy on reserve.

## On Reserve:

- Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art As Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1978, pp. 28-51.
- Carl Peterson, *Building Early America*, 1976. *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, series, vols. I-VIII (later ones have individual titles.)
- Gabrielle Lanier and Bernard Herman, *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic*, 1998.
- Simpson, "The Molded Brick Cornice in the Valley of Virginia," *APT Bulletin*, 1980. (last issue in the bound volume.)
- Robert St. George, *Material Life in America 1600-1860*, 1987
- Dell Upton, *Architectural Roots*, 1986.
- Upton and Vlach, *Common Places*, 1986.
- Other things may be added or suggested from time to time.

## Research Paper On Local Building

You will choose a building in Lexington or Rockbridge County and write a research paper that traces the building's history, its ownership, the place in the community of its owners, its present use and cultural meaning. You will apply the methods we have learned in class to consider its physical history, its social history, its function and meaning. I will suggest houses you may work on, but you can also choose one yourself with my agreement. See handout for additional information. The paper is due December 8.

## Buildings to Consider:

- Any of the group of three houses along Nelson Street opposite the dorm
- The Red House, East Asian Studies Center
- The old bank building, Brownsburg
- The Miller House, Jordans Point
- The Lime Kiln Office building, Randolph Street
- Hulls Drive-In
- The Lexington Fire Department Building
- MacDonalds
- Kennys, Waddell Street
- The house you live in?
- Or the dorm you live in?

## Method of Research:

### 1. Deed Search

Do a Deed Search at the courthouse to establish the chain of ownership

- a. Before you start you need to know who owns the property now and approximately when they got it.
- b. Start with the Deed Indexes. They are divided by grantors and grantees and by date. Since you know who owns it, look in the grantee index for the date period that is appropriate. That will be divided alphabetically, use the section in the front to find the page number. This will give you a deed book number and page reference. Institutions like W&L are grouped together at the end.
- c. Find the proper deed book and page and read the deed. You will probably find a reference to an earlier deed. In this way you can trace the property back to the late 19th c.
- d. You will eventually find a deed that does not refer to an earlier one. When that happens, you go back to the deed index for the right date period. Look for your last grantee. He may have bought several pieces of property so you have to look up all the deeds to see which is our property. Make sure you keep track of the deed book numbers and pages so you can construct a complete chain of title.

### 2. Tax Search/Maps and Photographs

Your best bet for trying to establish a date for the building is the tax records. They are in the basement under the clerk's office and are called "Land Books." The town of Lexington's buildings are all together at the back of each year's assessment and listed alphabetically by owner. Guess the date period of construction and then look up the tax record year by year and see if there is any change in the evaluation and any notes as to why. You should also look at the series of maps we have in special collections, starting with the 1877 Grey's Map which has names of owners on it, the 1903 water map does too, and then there are the late 19th and early 20thc. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. The whole collection of them is on microfilm and we have a number in special collections. They are color coded to indicate construction material. There are also photographic images of the town that you should look at.

### 3. Social History

Now that you have the names of the people who owned it and probably know who built it, you need to find out more about those people. If they are buried in the Lexington cemetery, there is Col. Couper's guide to the cemetery in our reference section in the library and it will tell you what is on the gravestone, including date of death. Then look up the obituary in the local papers, the Lexington Gazette or the Rockbridge County News to find out more about them. (Microfilm at W&L) If they

taught at VMI or at W&L there may be some material on them in special collections. There are birth, death and marriage records in the courthouse and they are also on microfilm in the library. W&L special collections also has some genealogy material that may include your people. Who were these people? What did they do? What was their status in the community? Has the use of the house changed over time?

For more recent occupants, you have oral history. You want to talk to the people who live there now and those who are still around who used to live there. Ask them about the changes to the house, its legends and history. Ask about how they use the house. Think about hierarchies of rooms, space use patterns, public vs. private, etc.

#### 4. Physical History

You need to do a floor plan to scale, describe and document the house and its appearance. Include a site plan and think of its relation to the space around it. What physical evidence do you have for change? For dating it? For stylistic aspects? Include photographs in your report to document the building's appearance.