Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture. Edited by Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press. 1986. Pp. xxiv + 529, bibliography, index, photographs, diagrams, sketches. Cloth $50.00; Paper $24.95.

Reviewed by Timothy H. Evans.

The study of American material culture has long been the poor relation of such disciplines as history, art history, anthropology, cultural geography and folklore. Publications have been scarce, for the most part amateurish, and scattered through a wide variety of journals and other publications, many of them local and obscure. The diffuseness of the field has caused many of its researchers to work in virtual isolation, and has made it difficult for any coherent, systematic or sophisticated body of theory to develop.

It would seem, however, that this dismal state of affairs is beginning to change significantly. Since the 1970's there has been a considerable increase in the number of publications in this area, and the 1980's have brought a proliferation of anthologies, surveys, bibliographies, histories of the fields, and even a monograph series.[1] Such endeavors are bringing unity, professionalism, and self-awareness to a field that has long been lacking these qualities.

With **Common Places**, Dell Upton and John Vlach have made a major contribution to this new literature. There has long been a need for a definitive and representative anthology of articles on American vernacular architecture; **Common Places** fills this need very well. Although, as with any anthology, one can argue about the choice of essays, this volume provides a generous sample of sound and meticulous scholarship, and a variety of materials, disciplines, and

approaches. It is large and attractive, and abundantly illustrated with high quality photographs, sketches, floorplans, and maps. There is an introduction, prefatory notes for each article, and a bibliography.

The editors have divided their 23 articles thematically, into five sections. In the first, "Definitions and Demonstrations," they are concerned with the boundaries of the field of vernacular architecture and the definitions and typologies of its materials. Their own definition, that a structure is vernacular according to "the degree to which an artifactual set represents its residents" (p. xvi), is very debatable. Surely there is as much social symbolism and as much identity at stake in a Victorian mansion, a Beaux Arts courthouse, or the latest post-modernist skyscraper, as in an I-house. The historians of elite architecture have not often studied social context, but that does not mean elite architecture lacks such context. The difference is more in the limitations of traditional disciplines, or in the social class of the creators of the structures, than in the degree of social identity invested in the buildings. This is a minor point, however, because definitional problems do not harm the book. Indeed, the authors' interdisciplinary focus is the one sure way of overcoming the limitations of conventional academic definitions and boundaries.

The "Definitions and Demonstrations" section is in many ways the most disappointing in the book, because it is the most conservative. Five of the six articles deal with folk traditions, only one with popular culture; four of them deal with origins and diffusion of particular architectural types. The section begins, appropriately, with Fred Kniffen's classic 1965 article, "Folk Housing: Key To Diffusion," which laid out much of the typology for the folk architecture of the eastern United States. Three other articles in this section are very much in the

Kniffian mode: John Vlach on shotgun houses, Stewart McHenry on field patterns of eighteenth century Vermont, and Edward T. Price on courthouse squares; all are concerned with defining types and tracing their origin and diffusion. Also included in this section is Clay Lancaster's definitive article on the American bungalow, and a little-known but first-rate article by Edward Chappell on the architecture of German-speaking peoples in Page County, Virginia, during the 18th century. Chappell offers meticulous documentation of the way material folk tradition in this time and place gradually shifted from German to Anglo, in the face of pressure to acculturate.

Part II, "Construction," is valuable as a guide to professional methodology in this area. Included is Kniffen and Glassie's classic 1966 article, "Building in Wood in the Eastern United States," which provided much of the basic typology for building techniques. Warren Roberts' article on "The Tools Used in Building Log Houses in Indiana" sheds a good deal of common sense as well as sound scholarship on this subject, as he shows how the careful analysis of houses can be used to reconstruct building techniques and thereby give insights into social structure. Missing from this section is any study of the actual, contemporary process of construction. This focus has been missing in the work of American historians, art historians, and folklorists - it is an especially disturbing omission among the latter - but the editors could have turned to anthropology for some first-rate work in this area.

In Part III, "Function," the editors focus on the interiors of houses, their arrangements and use, and the social implications thereof. Abbot Lowell Cummings' contribution is a guide to the use of inventories to establish both the contents and the social functions of old houses. Kenneth Ames' and Lizabeth Cohen's articles are

both exciting examples of the use of artifacts as data for social history. Ames examines Victorian hall furnishings, their functions as symbols of etiquette and social class, and the change in these artifacts as society changed. Cohen focuses on the furnishings of working class homes at the turn of the century, with their complex mixture of objects and relationships, of folk and popular traditions, and of indigenous culture and culture imposed by middle-class reformers. Both of these authors use a thorough and detailed analysis of material culture to explore issues of family structure, class structure, and social change.

Part IV is "History." James Borchert's analysis of alley housing in Washington, D.C. is brief but fascinating. Dell Upton's article looks at variation and change in 18th century Virginia farmhouses. Upton's emphasis on social structure as an underlying cause of architectural structure is enlightening, and a marked contrast to the structuralism of Henry Glassie's **Folk Housing in Middle Virginia**.[2] Robert Blair St. George, in his study of 17th century New England farms, sees class structure, economics, population density, and a number of other factors as producing subtle and complicated changes in architecture and the use of space. He uses a wide variety of sources, and his article suggests many methodological possibilities. Fraser Nieman, an archaeologist, reveals the tradition of post-built architecture in 17th and 18th century Virginia, which differed in almost every way from the later architectural traditions which have been much better documented. Since post-built houses by their very nature do not last more than a century, this tradition could only have been documented by an archaeologist. Archaeology and vernacular architecture are such obvious and useful partners that one can only wonder why they haven't been paired more often. Besides giving us data that would be otherwise

unavailable, archaeological methodology has considerable applicability to the study of culture change, even in contemporary situations.

Part V is "Design and Intention." Included is Henry Glassie's 1972 study of "Eighteenth Century Cultural Process in Delaware Valley Folk Building," a sort of precusor to the structuralism of his later work, **Folk Housing in Middle Virginia**. Catherine Bishir's fascinating article is on Jacob Holt, a mid-19th century house-builder in Virginia and North Carolina. Holt built a wide variety of structures depending on the needs of his clients, ranging from ornate mansions in the latest fashionable style to traditional, undecorated folk houses. This article points to a social and community-oriented approach to vernacular architecture, one that goes beyond mere academic categories such as "folk" and "popular." Barbara Rubin's article on urban commercial strips, which closes the book, is a kind of defense of "popular" as opposed to "mass" culture. She shows that popular architecture is not necessarily mass produced, impersonal or in "poor taste": it is a complex interaction of "mass society," local traditions, and personal initiatives.

As the editors themselves admit, the cumulative effect of these articles is to imply that vernacular architecture is "mostly old, mostly eastern, mostly rural, mostly domestic and mostly architectural" (p. xvi). They could have added "mostly Anglo" and "mostly lower class." Still, the selection of articles is indicative of the field. The editors could have made more of an attempt to be representative of different ethnic groups or areas of the country, but their main concern was obviously to find high-quality articles, and in this they have succeeded. Even in its omissions, **Common Places** is informative because it shows where work needs most urgently to be done: in cities, among the middle class, in the West, among Hispanics, and in the whole

area of contemporary vernacular architecture.

The most serious defect of **Common Places** is its exclusion of anthropology and of the Native American traditions upon which anthropologists have tended to focus. Otherwise, the editors succeed in including all the disciplines that have contributed to the study of American vernacular architecture. As a guide to a variety of sound, useful, and professional methodologies, **Common Places** is invaluable. As a source of theory, it is slightly less successful, but still very good. The criteria for selection seem to have been thoroughness and professionalism rather than originality. A number of the most thought-provoking articles in the field have been left out: for example, John Moe's "Concepts of Shelter: The Folk Poetics of Space, Change, and Continuity" and Jeffrey L. Eighmy's "The Use of Material Culture in Diachronic Anthropology"[4] are not even included in the bibliography.

In most respects, **Common Places** is superb. The articles and illustrations uphold the highest standards of quality, and their variety gives the reader a well-rounded and sophisticated view of the field. The editors' success at finding excellent but little-known articles in obscure places is especially to be commended. Upton and Vlach have created the definitive anthology on American vernacular architecture, a thorough survey of the field which can become the basis for new directions and ideas. Their book is invaluable to beginners and experienced professionals alike. It will, I suspect, be a central resource in vernacular architecture studies for a long time to come.

NOTES

1. The most useful guide to the field is Material Culture: A Research Guide, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 1985). Recent anthologies include Schlereth's Material Culture Studies in America (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982) and Ian Quimby's Material Culture and the Study of American Life (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978); bibliographies include Simon J. Bronner's American Folk Art: A Guide to Sources (New York: Garland Press, 1984) and Howard Wight Marshall's American Folk Architecture: A Selected Bibliography (Washington: American Folklife Center, 1981); surveys include Allen Noble's Wood, Brick and Stone: The North American Settlement Landscape (Amherst: University of Massachusets Press, 1984, 2 volumes) and John R. Stilgoe's Common Landscape of America, 1598-1845 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); histories of the field include Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976," in Material Culture Studies in America, and Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture (History of Anthropology, volume 3), ed. George W. Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). The monograph series is the UMI Research Press series on American Material Culture and Folklife, edited by Simon J. Bronner, which began in 1985.

2. Glassie, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).

3. For archaeological approaches to vernacular architecture, see James Deetz, In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Press, 1977) and the architectural articles in Modern Material Culture: The Archaeology of Us, ed. Richard A. Gould and Michael B. Schiffer (New York: Academic Press, 1981).

4. John F. Moe, "Concepts of Shelter: The Folk Poetics of Space, Change and Continuity," Journal of Popular Culture 11:1 (1977): 219/81-254/116. Jeffrey L. Eighmy, "The Use of Material Culture in Diachronic Anthropology," in Modern Material Culture, 31-50. Eighmy's focus, on two Mennonite communities in Mexico, is outside the geographic limits of this book, but American vernacular architecture scholars could learn much from his methodology.