THE POWER OF THINGS: RECENT STUDIES IN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

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THE STUDY OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE DIFFERS FROM OTHER ASPECTS of material culture studies treated in this bibliographical issue in two ways. First, the name itself is inadequate, since an increasingly large number of apparently disparate kinds of buildings have been included under its rubric. While the term "vernacular architecture" will be novel and puzzling to many readers, it was first used in the nineteenth century by architectural theorists to refer to traditional rural buildings of the preindustrial era, buildings that were apparently the houses of yeoman farmers and that seemed not to have been "consciously" designed or affected by the intellectual and artistic currents of the Renaissance.[1] They were thought to be in some sense "gothic" or medieval buildings, even though many of the examples cited were built long after the Reformation. Buildings of this sort or their functional equivalents in America—the log houses of the southern mountains and other folk buildings, for example—have continued to be the principal interest of many students of vernacular architecture. In recent years, however, the term has been extended to include less pretentious examples of any current style: mass-produced, middle-class housing such as one might find in any nineteenth- or twentieth-century speculative development, industrial buildings, the architecture of fast-food and other commercial franchises—virtually

[1]Richard Guy Wilson, "The Early Work of Charles F. McKim: The Country House Commissions," *Winterthur Portfolio* (hereafter cited as *WP*), 14 (1979), 241 n. 20. For early interest in vernacular buildings, and to illuminate the intellectual roots of modern vernacular architecture studies, see Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750–1950* (Montreal: McGill Univ. Press, 1967), esp. chs. 2–13.

anything not obviously the product of an upper-class, avant-garde, aesthetic movement.[2]

As a single unexceptional example of the variety of interests found in recent vernacular architecture studies, one might cite *Carolina Dwelling* (1978), a collection of essays on the North Carolina "vernacular landscape." In addition to articles on rural houses of the eighteenth through twentieth centuries that one might expect in a book about a culturally conservative agricultural state, the volume includes essays on a group of large mansions built in a local version of the then-current neoclassical high style, and on beach houses, porches, tobacco barns, town planning, courthouse squares, churches, mill houses built from published designs, and the representation of the landscape in postcards.[3]

The profusion of built forms drawn into recent vernacular architecture studies points toward the second characteristic that separates vernacular architecture from the other kinds of material culture included here. Often "vernacular architecture" has been a catch-all term for the study of kinds of buildings neglected by traditional architectural history. Furthermore, the study of vernacular architecture has been, mainly by default, an interdisciplinary or, more correctly, a multidisciplinary enterprise. Where the study of decorative arts, for instance, has been pursued largely within the bounds of art history, vernacular architecture has been examined from the perspectives of art and architectural history, social history, folklore, anthropology, historical and cultural geography, archaeology, architectural theory, and sociology, to name only those disciplines that come immediately to mind. This variety of approaches and interests has aggravated that fragmentation of focus fostered by the negative definition of vernacular architecture as not-high-style architecture.

For this reason, I have always avoided defining the term. When pressed, my preference is to define vernacular architecture not as a category into which some buildings may be fit and others not, but as an approach to architectural studies that complements more traditional architectural historical inquiries. Increasingly, it seems to me, the best studies of vernacular

[2]For examples of the diverse kinds of buildings included in the best vernacular architecture studies of recent years, see Elizabeth Collins Cromley, "Modernizing—or, 'you never see a screen door on affluent homes,' " *Journal of American Culture* (hereafter cited as *JAC*), 5 (1982), 71–79; Gary Kulik, "A Factory System of Wood: Cultural and Technological Change in the Building of the First Cotton Mills," in *Material Culture of the Wooden Age*, ed. Brooke Hindle (Tarrytown, N.Y.: Sleepy Hollow Press, 1981), 300–35; Paul Hirshorn and Steven Izenour, "Learning from Hamburgers: Architecture of 'White Tower' Lunch Counters," *Architecture Plus* (June 1973), 46–55; and the essays collected in Camille Wells, ed., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (Annapolis: Vernacular Architecture Forum, 1982).

[3]Doug Swaim, ed., *Carolina Dwelling: Towards Preservation of Place; In Celebration of the North Carolina Vernacular Landscape,* The Student Publication of the School of Design, vol. 26 (Raleigh: North Carolina State Univ., 1978).

architecture are characterized not by the kinds of buildings that they treat but by how they go about it. Vernacular architecture studies will have reached maturity when we have defined an inclusive approach to the study of all architecture that will eliminate the need for such an exclusive label as vernacular architecture.

In this essay I want to identify four avenues of inquiry that I think have been pursued in the best recent vernacular architecture studies. Others have summarized the field by dividing it along disciplinary lines, or by examining certain subsets of vernacular architecture.[4] My four approaches are interdisciplinary both with respect to the individuals who practice them and to the methods that they use. In no way do they include all of the kinds of buildings or all of the methods and theoretical assumptions to be encountered in current vernacular architecture publications, but I do believe that they represent the best work recently done, and the most likely lines along which vernacular architecture studies will continue to develop.[5]

OBJECT-ORIENTED STUDIES

By far the longest-lived strain of vernacular architecture studies has been concerned with the buildings themselves. How old are they? How were they made? How have they been changed over time? I have chosen the neutral term "object-oriented studies" for this approach, but in many respects it is the counterpart of the "scientific antiquarianism" practiced by some leading decorative arts scholars.[6] Indeed, the two have their roots in the turn of the century in the work of the same men.

The earliest students of vernacular architecture were the heirs of two related traditions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artistic thought. One valued the romantic and historical associations and the picturesque visual effects created by the actions of time and human alterations on the oldest buildings of a given area. The second encouraged the study of architectural history through the field examination and precise recording of buildings in measured drawings. The first American scholars—men like Norman Morrison Isham, Irving W. Lyon, and Henry Chapman Mercer—were similarly attracted to the oldest and most picturesque specimens of indigenous American architecture. They valued these buildings for their

[4]For good examples of alternate approaches, see Thomas J. Schlereth, "Historic Houses as Learning Laboratories: Seven Teaching Strategies," *History News,* 33 (1978), 87–98 (also available as *History News Technical Leaflet 105* and in Thomas J. Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past* [Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1980], 91–119); and Howard Wight Marshall, *American Folk Architecture: A Selected Bibliography,* Publications of the American Folklife Center, No. 8 (Washington: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1981).

[5]For a more comprehensive list of titles in all areas of vernacular architecture studies, see Dell Upton, "Ordinary Buildings: A Bibliographical Essay on American Vernacular Architecture," *American Studies International,* 19 (Winter 1981), 57–75.

[6]Michael J. Ettema, "History, Nostalgia, and American Furniture," *WP,* 17 (1982), 137–38.

visual appeal and as relics of the lives and ideals of the first Euro-Americans. Those who were architects used vernacular buildings as artistic source materials, but they felt no need to be bound by precedent in their own designs. Nevertheless, they had a growing sense that a true understanding of their sources depended upon precise antiquarian knowledge.

The first scholarly studies of vernacular architecture appeared in the 1890s. Norman Morrison Isham, an architect and instructor at Brown University, together with another Providence architect, Albert F. Brown, published in 1895 a study of Rhode Island's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses which was intended "to promote the collection of scientific data about the oldest houses in the original New England colonies, so that the vague descriptions of too many of our town histories may be supplemented by accurate measured drawings." Isham and Brown "personally examined, sometimes from garret to cellar, every house described in the text," so that "every plan, elevation, and section is based upon measurements of the house it illustrates." This emphasis on the recording of individual buildings in measured drawings was directly derived from the practice of European antiquarians, and was stimulated as well by Isham and Brown's arts-and-crafts inspired admiration for hand craftsmanship. Though drawing on a century-old tradition of the field study of antiquities, it was a method that was nevertheless novel in America, and it bore the mark of late nineteenth-century America's fascination with "science" in all things. Before Isham and Brown, some architects had made measured drawings of details, but no one had included plans, framing diagrams, and structural details, or had analyzed individual examples so meticulously. Isham and Brown followed their Rhode Island book with a parallel work on Connecticut, published in 1900. In both volumes, they supplemented their artifactual data with other information obtained from documentary sources, in particular probate inventories. Using both the written and the material evidence, they constructed an evolutionary sequence of house plans and external forms that is still frequently cited. Indeed, neither their methods nor many of their conclusions have been superseded in much of the object-oriented study of vernacular architecture.[7]

The formal and structural data that Isham and Brown provided were complemented by other early antiquarians who investigated the more minute details of American vernacular building. Had he lived longer, the

[7]Norman M. Isham and Albert F. Brown, *Early Rhode Island Houses: An Historical and Architectural Study* (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1895), 5–6; Isham and Brown, *Early Connecticut Houses: An Historical and Architectural Study* (1900; rpt. New York: Dover, 1965). As good arts and crafts men, Isham and Brown dedicated their books to the craftsmen of the two colonies, respectively. In 1863 John Hubbard Sturgis did make measured drawings of the soon-to-be-demolished Hancock House, Boston, but this was an isolated instance and not connected to a sustained scholarly project. (Margaret Henderson Floyd, "Measured Drawings of the Hancock House by John Hubbard Sturgis: A Legacy of the Colonial Revival," in *Architecture in Colonial Massachusetts,* ed. Abbott Lowell Cummings [Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1979], 87–111.)

Hartford physician Irving Whitall Lyon would have followed Isham and Brown's Rhode Island volume with an architectural study of his own. Lyon had a keen sense of competition with Isham, but his methods were those developed in his earlier, pioneering study of New England furniture. Like Isham and Brown, Lyon also consulted probate inventories, but he used them to correlate surviving artifacts with the names applied to them by their original owners. He was interested in the visual qualities of houses, and in the materials used to build them. Though Lyon died before his book could be completed, his details-and-materials orientation, rather than Isham and Brown's formal and technological approach, dominated vernacular architecture studies until the 1960s.[8]

It has been worth investigating the roots of object-oriented studies at such length because it is a lively, continuing tradition. Since Isham and Brown first published, object-oriented treatments, mostly of New England subjects, have continually appeared. The first generation also established the tradition of dealing almost entirely with domestic architecture, a tradition not frequently violated except in studies of modern buildings. With the exception of J. Frederick Kelly, who worked in Connecticut from the second decade of the century until his death in 1943, no subsequent scholar until recently has matched the quality and the originality of the founders' work.[9]

The greatest and one of the most recent contributions to object-oriented studies is Abbott Lowell Cummings's *Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625–1725* (1979).[10] This work, like others in the tradition, roughly parallels what decorative arts scholars call connoisseurship; that is, the identification and authentication of objects. Like his predecessors, Cummings is interested in the relationship between English and American building traditions, and by implication in the long-standing question of the "transit of civilization." Much of his attention is focused on identifying the English regional origins of craftsmen and particular architectural traits. The underlying assumption is that the character of American architecture, at least in the first part of the seventeenth century, can be understood as the sum of the regional origins of its builders. The identification process thus consists of an effort to match American buildings with English sources.

[8]Irving W. Lyon, *The Colonial Furniture of New England* (1891; rpt. New York: Dutton, 1977). Lyon's approach was similar to that followed by the antiquarians Henry Chapman Mercer of Pennsylvania and Wallace Nutting of Rhode Island, who also combined the study of traditional buildings and building materials with the study of furniture. For Mercer, see Joseph E. Sandford, *Henry Chapman Mercer: A Study* (Doylestown, Pa.: Bucks County Historical Society, 1956); and Claire Gilbride Fox, "Henry Chapman Mercer (1856–1930): Tilemaker, Collector, and Builder Extraordinaire," *Antiques,* 104 (1973), 678–85. For Nutting, see William L. Dulaney, "Wallace Nutting: Collector and Entrepreneur," *WP,* 13 (1979), 47–60.

[9]J. Frederick Kelly, *Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut* (1924; rpt. New York: Dover, 1966).

[10]Abbott Lowell Cummings, *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625–1725* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979). A valuable companion to Cummings's book is his "Massachusetts and Its First Period Houses: A Statistical Survey," in *Architecture in Colonial Massachusetts,* ed. Cummings, 113–221.

In addition to this concern for origins, Cummings shares with the vernacular architecture pioneers a holistic view of objects that has been lost in most recent studies. He treats plans, framing, the erection process, interior architecture, painting, and other decorative schemes, as well as building materials, within his text. Yet while his debt to his intellectual ancestors is obvious, he surpasses them in his understanding of the details of historical change in building traditions, in his interest in understanding the interrelations among building elements, and in his superior skill in analyzing and dating buildings. To all of this he adds an interest in aesthetic ideas that is derived from his training as an art historian.[11]

While modern object-oriented study has moved far beyond antiquarianism, scientific or otherwise, it tends still to rely too often on intuitive, rather than explicit, concepts of change. Even the most narrow antiquarianism involves assumptions about the people who made and used the objects, since artifacts are human products. Rather than specifying these assumptions, however, object-oriented researchers typically rely on a kind of common-sense functionalism and on aesthetic trickle-down theories to account for architectural choices. Other recent scholars have made use of architecture to understand its makers and users, rather than making assumptions about people in order to understand their artifacts. The single most important development in the vernacular architecture studies of the last twenty years has been to effect this reversal, to use objects as evidence about past and present human behavior. The change has come from several directions. Archaeologically and historically oriented English vernacular architecture studies introduced it to many people who were trained in object-oriented studies of colonial American buildings. Cultural geographers represent a second important strain of interest in the social aspects of vernacular architecture. In recent years, anthropologists and folklorists have added important theoretical concepts to the largely intuitive and descriptive efforts of the geographers.

SOCIALLY ORIENTED STUDIES

As the "new" history probes deeper into daily life in the past, buildings are

[11]Other studies in this tradition include Ernest A. Connally, "The Cape Cod House: An Introductory Study," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* 19 (May 1960), 47–56; Richard M. Candee, "A Documentary History of Plymouth Colony Architecture, 1620–1700," *Old-Time New England,* 59 (Winter 1969), 59–71; 59 (Spring 1969), 105–11; 60 (Fall 1969), 37–53; Paul E. Buchanan, "The Eighteenth-Century Frame Houses of Tidewater Virginia," in *Building Early America: Contributions Toward the History of a Great Industry,* ed. Charles E. Peterson (Radnor, Pa.: Chilton, 1976), 54–73; and Dell Upton, "Traditional Timber Framing," in *Material Culture of the Wooden Age,* ed. Hindle, 35–93. Most of these reflect the strong interest in building technology that characterizes object-oriented studies so much more than any of the other strains of vernacular architecture scholarship. The recent exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, "New England Begins," was built on a solid foundation of New England object-orientation, although several of the essays in the catalog went beyond that tradition to apply recent research in art history, anthropology, geography, and social history to the material. See *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century,* ed. Jonathan L. Fairbanks and Robert F. Trent (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982).

being examined both as a part of everyday existence and, more recently, as evidence for aspects of the past that can be known imperfectly or not at all from other kinds of evidence. The historical outlook on vernacular buildings was initially adopted by English scholars who asked what people had in the past.[12] This elementary question has inspired similar efforts to reassess the quality of the material culture of a variety of Americans. Because the earliest surviving Anglo-American houses do not resemble the large country houses of Europe, for example, architectural historians have tended to think of surviving seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American houses as representative of the dwellings of "average" colonials. Intense study in Maryland and Virginia over the past decade and a half has altered this picture drastically. In a long article in the *Winterthur Portfolio* in 1981, five historians and archaeologists examined the evidence for seventeenth-century housing in the Chesapeake and found that for most residents of the region "home" was a flimsy wooden house that required frequent repair and early replacement. Their conclusions reinforced the portrait of a precarious existence in an unstable society that has been drawn by recent social historians of the early Chesapeake. Yet they suggested that the possibilities for a contribution to the history of the area went beyond the mere seconding of documentary evidence. When and why did these "impermanent" structures cease to be the dominant architectural mode? In those parts of the region where detailed economic studies have been made, the change correlates with the transition from a purely tobacco-based economy to a more balanced or at least a less labor-intensive one. The field examination of buildings thus presents a way of investigating more quickly and in greater detail the point of transition, which varied from county to county. Vernacular architecture suggests that "the Chesapeake" was not as monolithic a place as it often appears to have been from documentary studies.[13]

Beyond the level of pure quality, other historians have begun to ask about the size of houses, and about the social use of the spaces they contained. If the surviving houses are, as the Chesapeake work indicates, much more substantial than those most early Americans lived in, they are also much larger. For all but the wealthiest people, houses of one or two rooms seem to have been the norm in the South and the Middle Colonies until the early

[12]The essential works are M. W. Barley, *The English Farmhouse and Cottage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); J. T. Smith, "The Evolution of the English Peasant House to the late 17th Century: The Evidence of Buildings," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association,* n.s. 33 (1970) 122–47; and Eric Mercer, *English Vernacular Houses: A Study of Traditional Farmhouses and Cottages* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975).

[13]Cary Carson, Norman F. Barka, William M. Kelso, Garry Wheeler Stone, and Dell Upton, "Impermanent Architecture in the Southern American Colonies," *WP,* 16 (1981), 135–96. Parallel studies of southern domestic objects, as yet unpublished, are being conducted by Barbara Carson, Cary Carson, Lois Green Carr, and Lorena S. Walsh.

nineteenth century at least, with slightly larger houses characteristic of the North.[14]

When houses were larger than that norm, vernacular architectural historians have begun to ask how possessions and daily activities were distributed within them. How did this distribution reflect changing social structures? Two modes of inquiry have been pursued here, one through the examination of spaces in standing buildings (or the spaces revealed archaeologically), and the other through the study of room names and contents as recorded in probate inventories. Where it was once common to assign fixed names and uses to rooms, more recently scholars have begun to observe that traditions of naming and use were flexible over time and social class, and that the disposition of objects and social activities was constantly reshaped by the developing structure of American society. For example, traditional room names and definitions altered drastically in the late seventeenth century. In the South, a hardening social distinction between masters and their white servants prompted the separation of masters' and servants' spaces in the second half of the century. This created the familiar plantation house with surrounding outbuildings that characterized the region throughout the antebellum period. A similar restructuring for other, as yet unexamined, reasons took place in other colonies.[15]

The possibilities for studying social change using architectural evidence are extensive, yet this aspect of vernacular architectural history has been under-utilized. It has clear promise for the analysis of more recent domestic architecture, for example. Studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century domestic life have tended to rely on prescriptive literature such as etiquette

[14]Dell Upton, "Toward a Performance Theory of Vernacular Architecture in Tidewater Virginia," *Folklore Forum,* 12 (1979), 180–84; Jack Michel, " 'In a Manner and Fashion Suitable to Their Degree': A Preliminary Investigation of the Material Culture of Early Rural Pennsylvania," *Working Papers from the Regional Economic History Research Center,* 5 (1981), 1–83; Robert Blair St. George, " 'Set Thine House in Order': The Domestication of the Yeomanry in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *New England Begins,* ed. Fairbanks and Trent, 165–72; Cummings, *Framed Houses,* 212–15.

[15]Abbott Lowell Cummings, ed., *Rural Household Inventories: Establishing the Names, Uses and Furnishings of Rooms in the Colonial New England Home, 1675–1775* (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1964), xi–xii; Cummings, *Framed Houses,* 216–32; St. George, " 'Set Thine House in Order,' " 165–72; Cary Carson, "Doing History with Material Culture," in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life,* ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (New York: Norton, 1978), 52–55; Fraser D. Neiman, "Domestic Architecture at the Clifts Plantation: The Social Context of Early Virginia Building," *Northern Neck Historical Magazine,* 28 (1978), 3096–128; Dell Upton, "The Origins of Chesapeake Architecture," in *Three Centuries of Maryland Architecture* (Annapolis: Maryland Historical Trust, 1982), 44–57. Cary Carson's article on English houses, "Segregation in Vernacular Building," *Vernacular Architecture,* 7 (1976), 24–29, is in fact an important contribution to the American research. Studies of the social uses of space in later periods and in larger buildings are scarce despite the popularity of Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977); but see Edward S. Cooke, Jr., "Domestic Space in the Federal-Period Inventories of Salem Merchants," *Essex Institute Historical Collections,* 116 (1980), 248–64; and Dell Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *WP,* 17 (1982), 95–119.

books, advertisements, and trade catalogs. Research along the lines of that undertaken for colonial American houses, incorporating the systematic inspection of standing buildings along with supporting evidence such as historic photographs, could supplement or circumvent the prescriptive literature. Historians might ask not only whether the literature was used, but to what extent, and could investigate the alternate domestic arrangements that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans adopted in addition to or instead of the middle-class norms promulgated in the published advice.[16]

CULTURALLY ORIENTED STUDIES

The social historical approach presumes that architectural forms varied with the social and economic structures of American society. Other students of vernacular architecture have asked about the more pervasive, less easily defined aspects of human activity that are sometimes grouped under the anthropological heading "culture." Culture can be defined for our purposes as learned behavior that embodies the enduring values and deepest cognitive structures of a social group.

Among the earliest investigators of vernacular architecture in this mode were the cultural geographers. Starting with the assumption that built forms were enduring aspects of any migrating group's culture, the geographers traced the distribution of major building types like the "I-house," a two-story, two-room-long, one-room-deep dwelling built in many parts of the United States into the twentieth century. The intention was to understand the patterns of cultural movement and integration created during the great migratory years of the nineteenth century.[17]

Henry Glassie's *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United*

[16]Three excellent studies that use the prescriptive literature are Kenneth L. Ames, "Meaning in Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (hereafter cited as *JIH*), 7 (1978), 19–46; Clifford E. Clark, Jr., "Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840–1870," *JIH,* 7 (1976), 33–56; and Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980). Fred W. Peterson compares standing vernacular buildings with the literature in "Vernacular Building and Victorian Architecture: Midwestern American Farm Homes," *JIH,* 12 (1982), 409–27. For photographs as a source for architectural study, see James Borchert, "Analysis of Historical Photographs: A Method and a Case Study," *Studies in Visual Communication,* 7 (Fall 1981), 30–63. A study that does some of what I am proposing here is Lizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working Class Homes, 1885–1915," *JAC,* 3 (1980), 152–75. In addition, Cary Carson and Lorena Walsh are preparing a major study of the material life of the American housewife along these lines.

[17]Among the earliest geographers to use American vernacular buildings in this manner was Fred B. Kniffen, whose "Louisiana House Types," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (hereafter cited as *AAAG*), 26 (1936), 179–93, was a pioneering effort; and whose "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," *AAAG,* 55 (1965), 549–77, remains a standard summary of the geographers' contribution to vernacular architecture studies. See also Fred B. Kniffen and Henry Glassie, "Building in Wood in the Eastern United States: A Time-Place Perspective," *Geographical Review,* 56 (1966), 40–66, for an important application of the geographical technique to building technologies rather than to built forms.

States (1968) is a large-scale application of the methods of cultural geography to a variety of artifacts, including buildings.[18] It marks the entry of American folklorists into vernacular architecture studies in an enduring way. Employing the geographers' concept of cultural hearths, Glassie identified four areas of the East Coast from which the material folk culture of the eastern United States emanated, and demonstrated the contribution of each to the distinctive artifactual landscapes of later-settled parts of the East. In the process, Glassie delineated the character of folk culture and its patterns of change. This book has been enormously influential not only for its theoretical base, but as a virtual catalog of traditional artifacts against which subsequent field-workers have measured their findings.

Cultural students of vernacular architecture have in the last decade moved away from the mapping and cataloging of forms to studying their intermixture and generation. Some have asked about the relationship of vernacular architecture to academic or avant-garde architecture. This issue touches on the very definition of vernacular architecture, since a specification of the relationship has often been built into that definition. Some people have conceived of vernacular architecture as imitative, in an inferior, old-fashioned, or "provincial" way, of elite forms. Others have seen it as competitive with, and ultimately the victim of, high-style architecture. Still others have depicted vernacular architecture as a kind of spontaneous or "natural" architecture that has no relationship to academic styles. Again, Henry Glassie has been the leader in rethinking this problem. In a series of essays he has pointed out that there was a change in the very structure of Euro-American cognition in the eighteenth century (in America), one that he has called, for convenience, Georgianization. This change was marked by a transition from a preference for symmetrical, organic forms, to forms that were rigidly symmetrical and tightly controlled. Both traditional and high-style buildings were transformed by this deep alteration in "mindset," which was related in complex and not yet clearly understood ways to the "Great Transformation" in other aspects of western life over which historians have been puzzling for so long. Glassie has gone on to suggest that vernacular builders had a distinctive way of seeing that allowed them to rethink high-style elements and to incorporate them into their buildings in their own manner, within the cognitive framework provided by the Georgian mindset. Glassie's elegant formulation of the concept of Georgianization has been accepted as a basic tool in most culturally oriented studies of vernacular architecture in recent years.[19]

[18]Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1968).

[19]Glassie touches on this issue in *Pattern,* 48–55, 64–69; expounds it fully in "Eighteenth-Century Cultural Process in Delaware Valley Folk Building," *WF,* 7 (1972), 29–57; and incorporates it into his much more complex argument in *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1975), esp. 31–32, 86–91. A work that uses this concept fruitfully is James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1977). Two efforts to detail the vernacular way of seeing in specific contexts are Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture"; and Peterson, "Vernacular Building."

Other culturally oriented students have been attracted to questions of ethnicity, interethnic influence, and acculturation. For example, questions about the nature of the Afro-American experience, which have engaged scholars of black history in general, have also affected vernacular architecture studies. While some writers have spent time chasing after a few questionable "African" buildings in the New World, others have taken a broader view. Following the lead of Robert Faris Thompson, who argued that many Euro-American and Native-American forms have been "reinterpreted" in characteristically Afro-American ways, folklorist John Michael Vlach has painstakingly traced the history of the shotgun house, an unprepossessing domestic form built in large numbers into the twentieth century, particularly along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Vlach has been able to show that the shotgun house, now used by both blacks and whites, was formed in the West Indies from the conjunction of a Caribbean Indian and an African house type with a French structural system, all unified by African-derived proxemic or spatial values. The shotgun house was a truly Afro-American form, a new entity created from elements of several ethnic traditions.[20]

Over the last thirty years archaeologists have questioned the character and utility of their classifications of artifacts as part of a reassessment of the concept of culture itself, and of the ways that artifacts embody culture.[21] Most of the cultural expositions of formal change cited so far depend on the concept of building typology, and tend to accept the existence of I-houses, shotgun houses, and other familiar types without question, and to assume in turn that they are useful cultural signs. The most recent developments in the cultural analysis of vernacular architecture, however, have incorporated archaeological concerns and questioned the very concept of the type as a relatively fixed entity readily identifiable in the field, or at the least inquired about how types are formed and what their connection is with "reality."

As an example, let us look at the familiar I-house. Its appearance in such large numbers and relatively standard forms suggest that though the name might be a modern one, the concept of a two-room house, two stories high, with a central hall or passage must have been learned in relatively complete form as a kind of "template" by many nineteenth-century Americans.[22] They

[20]John Michael Vlach, "The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy," *Pioneer America,* 8 (Jan./July, 1976), 47–70. Vlach has extended his analysis to other aspects of black material culture, including other kinds of houses, in *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978). Edward Chappell uses both the ethnic and the cognitive approaches in an analysis of Germanic architecture in western Virginia, "Acculturation in the Shenandoah Valley: Rhenish Houses of the Massanutten Settlement," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* 124 (Feb. 1980), 55–89. Glassie first noted the Anglicization and Georgianization of Germanic houses in *Pattern,* 48–55.

[21]The principal articles in the archaeologists' debate are conveniently collected in James Deetz, ed., *Man's Imprint from the Past* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

[22]It is important to note that the central-passage criterion is not one with which most scholars would agree. See Kniffen, "Folk Housing," 555; and Glassie, *Pattern,* 66–67. I include it because it seems to me that to include all two-story, two-room houses in the type is to create a category too vague to be useful. Given that, as I am arguing here, types are heuristic categories created by the scholar, I choose to make the central passage a diagnostic feature of the I-house because I

would learn at the same time to vary the template according to the preferred placement of chimneys, the number and location of windows and the presence or absence of fashionable trim. Yet surviving contracts for I-houses take for granted no such basic concept. They go into such detail as to suggest that there was no common reference point to which builder and client could conveniently look. Furthermore, standing structures show such variation as to suggest that any common concept must be a very general one, to allow for the differences among buildings that we group under the heading of a given type. Finally, while in any locality the traditional types are usually predominant, there are always a substantial number of buildings that do not fit easily into any category. Where is their template?

The same problems that arise in applying theory to artifacts were encountered in the study of language. Structural linguists, who also relied on a typological system, could not account satisfactorily for what the linguist Noam Chomsky called "creativity"—the ability of an individual to produce an infinite number of sentences and sentence types after a limited exposure to the language.[23] In buildings, we might express the problem of creativity as follows: vernacular buildings are infinitely variable; no two are alike in every respect. Yet the vernacular architecture of any area falls within a relatively narrow range of variations, thus allowing us to identify key "types," at least as a heuristic device. How can we account for both the variation and the patterning?

Chomsky proposed to use for language what he called a generative or transformational grammar that was based not on the surface analysis of observable behavior—the spoken sentence—and the postulation of a learned model or template, but on an attempt to use the behavior to understand the mental processes that produced it. He claimed that one learned *rules* from which any sentence type could be generated anew by applying the rules to a basic concept or kernel sentence. Thus, while the example of one's peers might lead one to repeat certain sentence types more than others, one could in fact generate an infinite variety of sentences at will.

Drawing on Chomsky's work, Henry Glassie has applied generative linguistics to architecture in his landmark book *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (1975). The first part of the work consists of a lengthy grammar of the traditional architecture of a small section of Piedmont Virginia, a set of rules from which, starting with a basic geometrical concept—the square—one could "generate" the houses of the region. Ultimately, Glassie turns back to the concept of the type, but the traditional types of middle Virginia can now

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find Glassie's argument about the profound character of the cognitive change it represents convincing. See *Folk Housing,* 51, 57, 88–91, 121–22. It is the widespread dissemination of central-passage I-houses in the early nineteenth century, not the introduction of two-story, single-pile houses in the seventeenth century, that seems to me to be the critical change for most American vernacular architecture. The concept of the mental template introduced here was presented by James Deetz in an important study of artifact typology in *Invitation to Archaeology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1967), 83–101.

[23]Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), 6.

be recognized simply as the most popular among all the variations created within the local context, and their relationship to the unusual examples is clearly specified in the grammar. Having constructed his grammar or "architectural competence"—a distilled statement of the architectural knowledge of all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century middle Virginians—Glassie has been able to show how new ideas were understood, reworked, and incorporated into the local tradition. In the second part of the book, he moves from the competence to the performance—to what was actually *done* by the builders, as opposed to what they knew how to do. Here he has set aside generative grammar in favor of an investigation of cognition based on the anthropological research of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Robert Plant Armstrong. Glassie has concluded that within the bounds of a mental outlook structured around binary oppositions, middle Virginians built houses that were increasingly private, artificial, intensive, practical, symmetrical, repetitious, and closed. Tradition is revealed not as dull mimicry of previous examples but as a shared body of knowledge in which choices arise out of the tension between individual inclinations and social context.[24]

Rather than correlating ethnicity or population migration with house types, Glassie has attempted in *Folk Housing* to use artifacts to probe mental structures. His work thus stands in direct opposition to that of the object-oriented school, who assume behavior to understand artifacts. His book pushes the issue of architectural form and its relation to cultural values much further than has ever been done, and it remains for others to catch up. Careful investigations of the mental principles of house design such as Glassie has provided would nevertheless go a long way toward correcting the fuzziness with which formal change and cultural significance are now treated. To date, while many people have imitated the sweeping cultural statements that characterize Glassie's work, few have based their pronouncements on the rigorous analyses and the command of linguistic and anthropological theory that underlie *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia.*[25]

SYMBOLICALLY ORIENTED STUDIES

The second half of *Folk Housing* treats the deep cognitive structures that

[24]Some readers have found that the concepts of structuralism and generative grammar are not explained fully enough in *Folk Housing* to enable them to grasp the argument in all of its subtlety. The gist of the grammar is summarized in Glassie's "Structure and Function, Folklore and the Artifact," *Semiotica,* 7 (1973), 313–51; and the carefully arranged and annotated bibliography in *Folk Housing* provides an excellent guide to the theoretical concepts that inform it.

[25]Among the best works that employ Glassie's cognitive approach are Tom Carter, "Folk Design in Utah Architecture, 1849–1890," in *Utah Folk Art: A Catalog of Material Culture,* ed. Hal Cannon (Provo: Brigham Young Univ. Press, 1980), 34–59; St. George, "'Set Thine House in Order'"; and two furniture studies, Robert F. Trent, *Hearts and Crowns: Folk Chairs of the Connecticut Coast, 1720–1840* (New Haven: New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1977); and Robert Blair St. George, "Style and Structure in the Joinery of Dedham and Medfield, Massachusetts, 1635–1685," *WP,* 13 (1979), 1–46.

shaped the general change in formal qualities of the houses, and although it is concerned less directly with the reasons for the choice of particular forms, and especially with decorative and aesthetic elements, it deals by implication with the *symbolic character* of the architecture. This is an issue that has been of greatest interest to, and treated most explicitly by, students of more recent kinds of vernacular buildings, although it cannot be said that anyone has yet hit upon the ideal methodology.

Symbolism is a form of social interaction that has been of considerable interest to recent anthropologists and linguists, and much of the symbolically oriented study of architecture, vernacular or otherwise, draws upon those disciplines in its search for the *meaning* of buildings.[26]

Linguistic models have been used to understand the structures through which architectural symbolism acts in society. For instance, students of older traditional or folk buildings have assumed, not always correctly, that the owners and users of them had a close involvement with their design, and that the structures therefore embodied the desires of the client in a direct manner. In an analysis of some eighteenth-century Virginia houses, I used sociolinguistic theory to suggest that vernacular builders chose a limited vocabulary of architectural forms from a range of possibilities available to all members of the society, and that these acted as "codes" that depended on, and at the same time reinforced, the connections among small groups of people. The focus was on the social effects of the choice, and it remained a descriptive effort that did not demonstrate why specific forms were chosen.[27]

Even these user-limited choices have rarely been available in the vernacular buildings of the last hundred years, during which time most buildings have been erected to standardized designs on speculation. The clients' selection has not been from among all or a limited range of possibilities, but from existing offerings. Discussion of newer buildings has therefore concentrated on the use of standardized formal elements as commercial bait and on their adaptation by consumers. How do builders of commercial housing or owners of hamburger stands attract buyers? To put it another way, what induces a client to choose one house or one chain store over another? What do users typically do to alter undistinguished, commercially built structures? In an article on recent "L. A. Add-ons and Re-dos" (1980), Michael Owen Jones investigated owner alterations to existing buildings, focusing on a functional consideration of the social interactions that remodeling facilitated but giving little attention to the symbolic character of forms or to the reasons that they attracted the remodelers. The latter was given more consideration by

[26]For anthropological and linguistic approaches to symbolism, see Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic By Which Symbols Are Connected* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976); Janet L. Dolgin, David S. Kemnitzer, and David M. Schneider, eds., *Symbolic Anthropology: A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1977); and Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism,* trans. Alice L. Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975).

[27]Upton, "Toward a Performance Theory," 173–96.

Elizabeth Collins Cromley, who inquired into the connotative qualities of building materials in her brief examination of home remodeling in East Coast cities.[28]

To date the most successful essays in symbolic architecture have utilized the semiotic theories fashionable among modern architectural critics in the late 1960s and 1970s. Semiotics, derived from linguistics, is the study of signs. Semioticians presume that all communicative systems are structurally analogous to spoken languages. In the study of architecture, semiotics proposes that buildings and their formal elements are systems of signs that communicate identification with or rejection of a given social group, specific social values, status, or merely assertions of existence in a social or commercial sense.[29]

Within vernacular architecture studies, semiotics has appealed most to those reassessing the commercial strip and its domestic equivalent, the tract house. The strip has been condemned by academic aestheticians as chaotic, manipulative, and destructive of community values. Barbara Rubin traced the origins of this view, and of the strip architecture that inspired it, to the Midway Plaisance, the amusement sector of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. She identified strident commercial buildings with the efforts of small entrepreneurs to be noticed and to survive in an economic environment controlled by monopolistic corporate giants. At the same time the corporation was squeezing entrepreneurs economically, its aesthetic allies were denouncing their garish commercial buildings. Strip architecture can thus be seen as in some sense a populist challenge to the ruling order.[30]

Rubin's essay is a sensitive one, and she has taken into account the social and aesthetic problems that her view raises. Other devotees of the strip and of tract housing have been less ambivalent. They have chosen to celebrate these forms rather than to examine them critically. The most influential of these proponents has been a group of Philadelphia architects, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, and Paul Hirshorn, whose works have treated tract housing, Las Vegas casinos, and hamburger stands.[31] Their

[28]Michael Owen Jones, "L.A. Add-ons and Re-dos: Renovation in Folk Art and Architectural Design," in *Perspectives on American Folk Art,* ed. Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank (New York: Norton, 1980), 325–63; Cromley, "Modernizing," 71–79. A lengthy exploration of Jones's and Cromley's theme that gives more attention to symbolic form is Philippe Boudon's study of the Pessac housing estate in France, *Lived-in Architecture: Le Corbusier's Pessac Revisited,* trans. Gerald Onn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979).

[29]Charles S. Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1938) has been most helpful to me in understanding semiotics. Two important applications of the theory are Glassie, "Structure and Function"; and Charles Jencks and George Baird, eds., *Meaning in Architecture* (New York: George Braziller, 1970).

[30]Barbara Rubin, "Aesthetic Ideology and Urban Design," *AAAG,* 69 (1979), 339–61. See also her "Chronology of Architecture in Los Angeles," *AAAG,* 67 (1977), 521–37.

[31]Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977); Venturi and Rauch, Architects and Planners, *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City* (Washington: Aperture, 1976); Paul Hirshorn and Steven Izenour, "Learning from Hamburgers"; Paul Hirshorn

explication of the symbolism of popular architecture is more explicitly semiotic than Rubin's. These forms are designed to make a qualitative and existential statement quickly, strikingly, and simply. The strident message is well-suited to the speed and landscape scale of automotive travel. The work of Venturi and his colleagues has often been marked by facility and intellectual one-upsmanship, and like those who, under the title commercial archaeologists, study the strip academically, they have tended not to distinguish the products of individual entrepreneurs such as Rubin discusses from those of the design departments of giant corporations. Strips and tract houses are presumed to exist because "the people" want them. This eliminates consideration of power and class from the discussion of development strategies, and substitutes the dictum that whatever is, is almost all right. Nevertheless, embedded in their cuteness is a theory of architectural design and symbolism that distinguishes an academic process of composition in integrated wholes from a popular process—evident in Las Vegas and Levittown—in which composition proceeds by the additive compilation of discrete symbols, with the effect created not by integration but by accumulation.[32] A more rigorous exploration of this idea might prove to be the most lasting contribution of the group to vernacular architecture, and to architectural theory generally.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Each of the four avenues of inquiry that I have mapped out is important for the future of vernacular architecture studies. Object-oriented research will always be necessary, for there is much data to be gathered, much remaining to be understood about the physical history of buildings. This understanding forms the basis of all other vernacular architecture research. All of the best publications in any of the four categories that I have treated are grounded in an intimate first-hand knowledge of the artifacts, and poor ones inevitably betray their authors' inadequate grasp of the physical evidence.

The next step for all students of vernacular buildings is to recover the insight that the object-oriented pioneers of the late nineteenth-century shared—that architecture cannot be adequately understood apart from its contents and its context. We need histories of vernacular architecture that integrate furniture, yards, farmsteads, and ultimately, settlement patterns into the whole. Some attempt has been made in this direction within each of the four branches of the field. Abbott Lowell Cummings has written about

and Steven Izenour, *White Towers* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979). The inclusivist aesthetic that underlies this enthusiasm for commercial architecture is set forth in Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* 2nd ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977).

[32]The description of the two modes of symbolic composition bears an intriguing resemblance to the ideas set forth by Richard Krautheimer in his "Introduction to 'An Iconography of Medieval Architecture,' " *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* 5 (1942), 1–33, which makes useful reading for anyone interested in the character of architectural symbolism.

probate inventories and household furnishings.[33] The historians and archaeologists of the St. Mary's City Commission in Maryland have combined, in their inventory analyses, the study of houses and their contents from the social historian's perspective, as has George McDaniel in his study of post-bellum black life in the same region.[34] Investigators of modern tract houses have sometimes looked at their contents as well.[35] Henry Glassie has again set a standard to be striven for in his latest work, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (1982). This study of a small Ulster town integrates the architecture and furnishings of the townspeople with their oral literature in a way that is both daunting and exciting, and that fuses all four of the modes of thought that I have outlined into a single powerful entity.[36]

Of these four approaches, the fourth may be the most promising for future development. The study of objects as signs and symbols may provide underlying connections and a key to the artifactual landscape as a system in a way that helps us to understand the choices that people make in adopting and adapting building forms and all other objects, and to see material culture as primary rather than as supporting or reflective evidence for larger inquiries. If that is to happen, we must move away from the semiotic conception of architectural symbols as keys to corresponding, simpler values.[37]

Vernacular architecture publications often include a rather egregious appeal to a higher (or deeper) reality, to a set of embedded "communal values" that make this material more valuable than other kinds of architecture for understanding "most people." The study of architectural symbolism, to be useful, can and must move beyond such consenus-oriented claims to the study of architecture as ideology. How do buildings—vernacular buildings and high-style buildings—embody and convey the competing values of groups in their material surroundings? The study of contemporary tract housing and of commercial architecture, stripped of the cheerleading that too frequently characterizes it now, holds great promise for developing this kind of inquiry. As with documentary history, the study of past landscapes is, more than we realize, an exploration of the material culture of the winners. This is true in the sense that the best and most substantial buildings have

[33]Cummings, ed., *Rural Household Inventories.*

[34]George McDaniel, *Hearth and Home: Preserving a People's Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1981). Of course, Alan Gowans's *Images of American Living: Four Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964), though only partly concerned with vernacular architecture, was the too-little-heeded pathfinder here.

[35]Venturi and Rauch, *Signs of Life.*

[36]Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Balleymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

[37]"What this view requires is a concentration on symbolic *processes,* instead of requiring that the analysis of meaning show only how a particular form represents a more elementary one . . . ." ("Introduction" to *Symbolic Anthropology,* ed. Dolgin, Kemnitzer, and Schneider, 44.)

survived, and that these are usually the houses of the better-off segments of the population, but it is true in a broader sense as well. The buildings that have survived in numbers are those that have been best adapted to the lives of subsequent generations. They do not necessarily represent the dominant or preferred modes of the past. The complementary use of documents can correct some of this skew, but more than we would like to admit the study of past material culture will always be a kind of Whig history. The investigation of contemporary artifactual landscapes is less subject to this stricture, and it has the advantage that another kind of source—the testimony of makers and users—is available to enrich the analysis of the physical world. Thus, while vernacular architecture studies have for most of the past century concentrated on the rural domestic architecture of preindustrial America, and while there is much remaining to be done there, the buildings being constructed and used right now may offer the greatest potential for theoretical and substantive contributions in the forseeable future.[38]

Artifacts are inherently more powerful than words. To see an aesthetic or a social vision realized in the material world is to be captured by it, to lose one's grip on alternative possibilities. Unfortunately for vernacular architecture and other material culture scholarship, this spellbinding quality of objects has too often resulted in essays that have been purely descriptive. We have been overpowered by our subject matter. We have not been able to find verbal concepts equal to the things themselves, and few material culture studies have progressed much in quality, methodology, or analytical depth beyond those of the founding fathers and mothers of the late nineteenth century. At the same time, the inherent power of the physical world suggests that for those who can break the spell—and I think the scholars discussed in this essay have made the most significant steps toward creating a mature, analytical study of vernacular architecture—an immensely revealing and exciting vein in the study of American life will be opened.*

[38]It is also worth noting that urban commercial and domestic vernacular architecture has been almost totally neglected, but see Mary Ellen Hayward, "Urban Vernacular Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Baltimore," *WP,* 16 (1981), 33–63.

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