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Chapter 4

Engaging the future

Vernacular architecture studies in the twenty-first century

Marcel Vellinga

> *There's something cosy about vernacular architecture; it's a sheltered retreat for many who fondle the adze-marks, feel the fit of the ashlar or marvel at the assembly of post, wall-plate and tie-beam. Somehow, there's not the craftsmanship anymore; all that honest workmanship with simple tools and muscle – it's gone.*
>
> Oliver (1984: 17)

> *But it's happening, here and in scores of other estates around the country, new messages are being uttered in the vernacular but, as far as I'm aware, no one is devoting much attention to finding out what they mean.*
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> Oliver (1984: 19)

Introduction

Recently, in his *Village buildings of Britain* (2003), Matthew Rice lamented over the state in which vernacular traditions in Britain find themselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Largely ignored by conservationists and those involved in the provision of housing, the future of the British vernacular is far from bright, so Rice tells us. From the nineteenth century onwards rapid cultural and economic change, spurred on by processes of industrialization and urbanization, has

dramatically altered the face of the British countryside. As rural people left to work and live in the cities and, more recently, city dwellers moved back to the country, the social infrastructure of many village communities has, in Rice's words, been 'destroyed'. Concomitantly the vernacular heritage of Britain 'is now in the hands of those who do not understand it', the retired couples and white-collar commuters who have bought the houses left by the agricultural workers who went away or were forced to move into council estates. As a result many old vernacular buildings in Britain are today converted in an 'insensitive' way, having modernist views of 'a perfect country cottage' imposed upon them that paradoxically turn large parts of the villages into the suburbia that the new owners tried to leave behind when they moved to 'the country'. Local councils and planning departments have not done enough to stop these 'damaging' developments by allowing property developers to built estates filled with bungalows and semi-detached houses, while not fully recognizing, let alone enforcing the importance of maintaining architectural connections with the local vernacular (Rice 2003: 8–14).

Clearly, Rice has a less than positive perspective on the contemporary status of the British vernacular and, more particularly, on the way in which it is made to respond to the demands of the time and the wishes of its current owners and inhabitants. Essentially based, it seems, on aesthetic and emotional judgements, his view of the vernacular is a static and conservative one. For Rice, British vernacular architecture consists of historical rural buildings that were built before the Industrial Revolution, in a time when villages in Britain were agriculturally based and supposedly self-contained, and the construction of the railways had not yet facilitated the replacement of traditional materials and crafts with imported modern ones. Although he recognizes that architectural development and expansion is unavoidable in many places, it is a prime responsibility of the householders and developers of today to carefully preserve this 'pristine' vernacular of half-timbered houses, limestone cottages and granite farmhouses so that the much celebrated British vernacular landscape will not be 'spoilt' any further. Thus, for example, he laments over the way in which 'overzealous' conversion has turned too many Cotswold barns into 'awkward hybrids' that have been 'stained' by the use of 'particularly nasty treacly brown' colours and the addition of 'horrid car ports', arguing instead that such buildings should be maintained and used in as original a manner as possible (Rice 2003: 95).

Rice's purist and static perspective by no means represents the views of all those involved in the field of vernacular architecture studies. Nonetheless it is fair to say that his point of view is not unique or isolated either. Ever since the vernacular became an area of academic and professional interest in the late nineteenth century, a predisposition towards the study and untouched preservation of the oldest and therefore supposedly most 'authentic' or 'traditional' buildings has been strong. Today this tendency is still prevalent among many scholars in the field, regardless of whether they work in western or in so called developing countries, and despite repeated calls for new and more dynamic approaches, and the growing number of studies that have tried to answer them (e.g. Oliver 1969; Bourdier and Alsayyad 1989; Abu-Lughod 1992; Upton 1993).

Up to a point, this conservative and defensive approach towards the vernacular is understandable and justified. Numerous vernacular traditions today face challenges that seriously threaten their survival into the twenty-first century. The vulnerability of vernacular traditions in the face of forceful processes of modernization and globalization makes it desirable to document, study and preserve historical and traditional buildings before they may be lost or become irreversibly changed. Yet ultimately, I believe, it is an approach that is too narrow and restricted, as it results in representations of vernacular traditions that are frozen in time, incomplete and, quite often, romanticized. Besides, and equally importantly, it effectively hinders the development and survival of those traditions by reconfirming, unintentionally no doubt, the persistent stereotypes that represent vernacular architecture as picturesque and charming, yet out of date and irrelevant.

In my opinion, the continued tendency of scholars and conservationists like Rice to approach the vernacular as comprising of pre-modern historical and traditional buildings that have to be studied and appreciated in their 'pristine' state, and that accordingly need to be safeguarded from the onslaughts of modernization and change, has restricted the scope and development of the field of vernacular architecture studies and continues to hamper the recognition of the vernacular as an architectural category worthy of full academic and professional attention. Rather than helping vernacular traditions develop and endure by pointing out their dynamic character and their potential relevance to the provision of sustainable architecture in the future, it relegates them to the past by emphasizing either their historical or traditional, but in any case unchanging and outdated status.

In this chapter I will suggest that what is needed instead of this static and essentially historical perspective, or in any case alongside it, is an approach that explicitly focuses on the dynamic nature of vernacular traditions, one that attempts to show and understand how vernacular traditions, here and now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, will change and adapt to the cultural and environmental challenges and circumstances of the present and future. By no means the first to have called for such a perspective (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1992; Upton 1993), I believe that a more dynamic approach that views tradition as a conscious and creative adaptation of past experience to the needs and circumstances of the present will significantly broaden the scope of the field of vernacular architecture studies, allowing for studies that focus on new and emerging traditions as well as on enduring ones and, crucially, on the ways in which they interact and relate to one another. In doing so, it will help to rid the discourse of the persistent stereotypes about 'disappearing worlds', underdevelopment and irrelevance that are so common among members of the academy, architectural professionals and the general public. What is more, it will pave the way for a more action oriented approach that perceives the vernacular as a source of architectural knowledge and that critically examines the way in which this know-how may be integrated with new forms, resources and technologies so as to develop culturally and environmentally sustainable architecture for the future.

Before discussing the possibilities and challenges of such a more dynamic and active approach, it is first necessary to critically consider the concept of the vernacular so as to understand the current predisposition towards stasis and the past.

Narratives of loss and decline

Some ten years ago, Dell Upton (1993) argued that the field of vernacular architecture studies, though more or less established and increasingly recognized within the academy, had so far been held back by the limitations of its own assumptions and definitions. Regarding the vernacular as an enduring, but essentially static and passive category that is defined in opposition to the more dynamic categories of the modern and the formal, most scholars of vernacular architecture have tended to concentrate their work on a small number of buildings only. These are the rural and pre-industrial log cabins, farmhouses and barns that, in the British context, also constitute the focus of Rice's attention. Meeting the ideal characteristics of the vernacular, they are perceived to be vernacularly 'authentic', having been built by their owners in pre-modern times, in keeping with the values and needs of their local communities, and using local resources and technologies. As a result of this restricted focus on so-called 'pristine' buildings, most work on the contemporary use and meaning of such vernacular traditions has, as in Rice's lament, tended to emphasize processes of loss and decline. In focusing on the pre-industrial rural building heritage, Upton writes, the discourse on vernacular architecture has committed itself to models of 'acculturation, contamination, and decline, models of impaired authenticity and reduced difference'. Rather than acknowledging and trying to understand the transformations of the buildings in an era of post-modernism and globalization, 'our tales are tales of woe or tales of heroic resistance (which are simply their complement)' (1993: 12).

Though Upton's discussion is mainly directed at the discourse on Anglo-American vernacular architecture, he rightly notes that his remarks are equally applicable to much of the work done in a non-western context. Though perhaps not as dominant a tendency as in the discourse on the western vernacular, seeing that analyses that focus on the way in which non-western traditions change in response to the process of globalization have become more common in the last fifteen years or so, many studies of African, Asian or Latin American vernacular architecture have tended to focus on those building traditions that are regarded as 'traditional', in the sense that they are or have directly evolved out of indigenous building traditions that existed in the period just before or during the colonial encounter. In comparison to the studies that document and analyse such traditional patterns of space use, construction, design and symbolism (e.g. Blier 1987; Waterson 1990; Prussin 1995; Bourdier and Minh-ha Trinh 1996), studies that pay attention to more recent and modern (or modernized) indigenous building traditions are relative rare; despite the fact that these traditions, though admittedly not always as exotic or distinctive, arguably meet the definitions of what vernacular architecture is and, quite often, constitute the majority of buildings in the societies concerned. Again, as in the discourse on the western

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vernacular, what is identified as vernacular architecture are the 'authentic' traditional buildings that, still today, are seen to form part of some indefinable ethnographic present that preceded the modern present. If the influences of new and modern traditions are dealt with, it is often in negative or, not infrequently, derogative terms (e.g. Bourgeois 1989). In general the perception is that the advance of the one inevitably leads to the contamination, destruction and disappearance of the other.

As Upton notes, this persistent predisposition of scholars of the vernacular to focus on the past and tradition and, more particularly, the emphasis on narratives of cultural decline and damage that tends to accompany it, does not stand on its own. Daniel Miller (1995: 264) has observed how, during the mid-twentieth century, anthropological monographs often ended with a chapter on social change. Typically these chapters reported on the introduction of modern (usually western) practices, ideologies and, especially, consumption goods, and discussed the negative impacts that their arrival had on the perceived integrity and authenticity of the cultures concerned. Like Rice, the authors of these monographs presumed the bygone existence of a traditional era in which indigenous cultural traditions were still pure and authentic; an era, that is, against which the advance of modern western influences could be juxtaposed. Marshall Sahlins (1999) has recently shown how this perspective on cultural authenticity and change is intricately bound up with what he calls the despondency theory. Particularly dominant in anthropology during the mid-twentieth century, this theory posed that traditional cultures, once they had been brought into contact with the west, would irrevocably fall into despondence, as a result of which indigenous social structures, practices, values and beliefs would soon and inevitably decline and be lost. As a manifestation of western modernist attitudes towards history, culture and tradition, and as a logical successor to the social evolutionist theories of the late nineteenth century, it posed that, ultimately, traditional cultures would have to become modern and 'just like us – if they survived' (Sahlins 1999: iii).

And of course, no one can deny that such processes of cultural assimilation, decline, conflict and loss have all too often taken place in the time of western expansion and colonization. Nor, indeed, can anyone deny that they have been common in the post-colonial period of modernization or that they are still widespread in the current era of globalization. Yet, Sahlins notes (1999: ix–x), as real and widespread as they may be, they do not necessarily make up the whole story, for next to the unmistakable tales of woe there are also tales of cultural persistence and vibrancy. Thus he gives the example of the Siberian Yupik on St Lawrence Island who, despite an increased incorporation into the world capitalist system and the introduction of modern means of production, transportation and communication still maintain their hunter-gatherer culture and basically 'are still there – and still Eskimo [sic]' (1999: vii). Rather than having succumbed to the pressures of modernization and development, as early ethnographies predicted, the Yupik have adapted their culture by incorporating certain modern elements (mainly technological ones), while maintaining or even strengthening traditional

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others; as such further developing a culture that is, ultimately, still distinctly Yupik. They have, in Sahlins words, indigenized modernity by creating their own cultural niche in the global scheme of things. And, as Sahlins notes, the Yupik case does not stand on its own. Nor, indeed, is it an example that is characteristic of or restricted to the late twentieth century only. As Eric Wolff (1982) has so convincingly shown, contacts and interconnections between cultures have taken place in the past as much as in the present, and most, if not all cultures in the world are the result of processes of encounter and confrontation, as well as of cultural borrowing and merging.

A major shortcoming of much of the current vernacular discourse, I believe (especially that dealing with western traditions), is that it does not really acknowledge this processual, heterogeneous and adaptive character of cultural traditions. Overall it still tends to regard vernacular traditions as homogeneous, passive and rather static entities that can be classified into bounded geographical, chronological and typological categories (Cotswold, colonial, yurt), and that may consequently be lost in the encounter with other, more active, modern traditions. In doing so, the processes of cultural interrelation, merging, change and indigenization that have been increasingly acknowledged in disciplines such as anthropology, cultural geography and history are largely ignored. Effectively, much of the discourse still focuses on the study of building traditions in particular regions or, especially in the case of the western vernacular, in specific time periods. When discussions of change are entered into (as, admittedly, they frequently are), these are often restricted to analyses of typological transformations in time or space or, in the case of changes resulting from encounters with other (usually 'modern') traditions, they tend to be set off against an ideal and dehistoricized past or ethnographic present. Like the cultural traditions in the anthropological writings of the 1950s and 1960s, in most of these cases the vernacular is defined as a separate category consisting of traditional buildings that may be opposed to modern ones and that are in danger of losing their authenticity and integrity when confronted with the impacts of modernity. Many are the authors that, like Rice, still describe the arrival and incorporation of new technologies, materials, uses and meanings in confrontational terms, instantaneously viewing them as the beginning of the end of a distinctive (vernacular) era rather than as an active adaptation and continuation of a living tradition. The vernacular and the modern, it seems, cannot go together.

Yet they *do* go together and merge, right at this moment and all around the world, in all kinds of different and sometimes surprising ways; just like cultural transfers and exchanges have always taken place in the past and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future. And the result is the contemporary emergence of all kinds of new and adapted traditions that, though different from the ones that preceded them, are authentic in their own right and that, I will argue below, can still be seen as vernacular. After all, many traditions that are now seen as vernacularly authentic in fact evolved out of the amalgamation of different traditions. North American log cabins, Nootka (Nuu-chah-nulth) plank houses, Maori *whare hui*, fired brick vaults in Afghanistan and Pennsylvania barns, to name but a few,

all, in one way or another, result from the encounter of different cultural traditions (Weslager 1969; Marshall 2000; Austin 1997; Szabo and Barfield 1991; Ensminger 1992). Many other examples of architectural adaptation, borrowing, hybridization and amalgamation can be given. In all cases one now speaks of truly vernacular traditions, yet none of the traditions concerned has a static, isolated or homogeneous history. As in the case of the Yupik, over time outside influences in terms of technology, use, resources or form have been incorporated into existing building traditions, as such further developing the latter or creating new hybrid or creolized forms. The outside influences have, in Sahlins' terms, been indigenized or, perhaps more appropriately in this context, 'vernacularized'. Of course, I do not want to deny that in the course of time, in the process of such cultural encounters, many distinctive building traditions have been lost, or that they still continue to do so at present; once more, however, such examples do not necessarily make up the whole story.

De-reifying the vernacular

As Upton (1993: 10–12) has argued, the narratives of decline and loss that characterize much of the discourse on vernacular architecture are traceable to and reflected in the way in which the concept of the vernacular has generally been interpreted and defined. Though the diversity of traditions makes it difficult to draw up a single definition (see Oliver 1997b: xxii), there are a number of elements that seem common to most, if not all, current understandings of the concept. At the heart of these, Upton notes, are a number of 'us' and 'them' dichotomies that serve to define the vernacular in opposition to categories like the formal and, especially, the modern, and that essentially relegate vernacular traditions to a time and space that is distinctly different from the latter. Thus the vernacular is generally said to be the culture of 'true' communities that, like Rice's pre-industrial British villages, are supposedly largely homogeneous, socially cohesive and, not infrequently, agriculturally based. Besides it is often understood to embrace the building traditions of the people rather than those of the elite and is generally, as noted, seen as stable, passive and instinctive rather than as changing, active and conscious (Upton 1993: 10–11). Added to this may be the widespread notion, recently reiterated by Steen *et al.* (2003), that the vernacular is generally built using natural and ecologically sustainable resources and technologies rather than with the manufactured materials and mechanized means that characterize much modern architecture. In essence, then, the vernacular is seen to belong to a distinct time and space in which, in Henry Glassie's (2000: 49) words, there is an active engagement with nature and other people; it is part of 'a discrete, pre-lapsarian arena of social experience that lies just beyond our own experience and can never be directly accessible to us' (Upton 1993: 12).

Glassie (2000: 20) recently rightly noted that, in giving the vernacular a name, it has been given an existence. Having isolated vernacular architecture as a field of study, the importance to architectural history of long neglected non-monumental and non-western building traditions has been increasingly recognized and acknowledged. Yet, following Upton, I would argue that in the

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process of naming and defining, the vernacular, as a category, has become reified. To speak with Wolff (1982: 3), a name (a residual category of buildings that, ultimately, are not fundamentally different from other forms of architecture) has become a thing. In the worthy pursuit of recognition for building traditions other than the so-called Great Ones, a distinctive and bounded category has been created that can be opposed to other categories such as the formal, the modern, the popular and the informal; categories that are themselves in fact as much reifications as the vernacular. Unfortunately, in doing so, what those involved in the field set out to achieve was partly lost. By interpreting and defining the vernacular in terms that oppose it to the modern, the category has essentially been referred back to a pre-modern past, notwithstanding the repeated reminders that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the vernacular still comprises the vast majority of buildings in the world. Consequently, contemporary building traditions largely neglected by architectural history (for example, suburban houses, squatter settlements, self-built 'counter culture' architecture) have also been ignored in the field of vernacular architecture studies. Besides the interconnections between those traditions identified as vernacular and those that are modern, or popular or informal, and the new traditions that emerge from their creative amalgamation, are not really incorporated into the discourse.

Because of the reified nature of the definition, all changes that take place to the vernacular in the present will automatically be seen as cultural decline and a loss of authenticity. If a building is to be truly vernacular, it will have to be part of a cultural context (pre-industrial, rural, socially homogenous and self-contained) that, in contemporary times, will be ever harder to find. In the process of definition then, though crucial in terms of the recognition of vernacular traditions as forms of architecture, the vernacular has effectively been banished to the pre-modern past by those who championed it, while simultaneously, by not really allowing for change, it has been denied both a history and, indeed, a future. In doing so, the dynamic indigenization or vernacularization of outside (modern, formal, global) cultural influences has largely been ignored. Furthermore the common and persistent stereotypes about vernacular architecture are confirmed, which in turn further affirms the ambivalent status of the vernacular and strengthens the perception that it is irrelevant to the future. With the unstoppable advance of modernity, the vernacular field of study finds itself in a serious predicament, getting smaller and smaller every year. A disappearing world, indeed.

Yet, as noted, vernacular traditions have not all vanished, but in many cases have merged (just like they have always done) with modern ones to create new manifestations of tradition or localized hybrid forms that better suit current circumstances and requirements. What is needed therefore, I believe, to evade the predicament of the vernacular, is to break free from the limitations of the current conceptualizations by adopting a more dynamic interpretation that more explicitly recognizes the ways in which old and new building traditions merge, adapt, combine and, in the process, become vernacularized. The vernacular, in other words, needs to be de-reified. Rather than treating it as a category that consists of buildings that, as static objects, can be categorized in neat types and

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periods and that, concomitantly, may be more or less real or authentic depending on which type or period they belong to, the dynamic and processual nature of buildings, and of the building traditions of which they form part, should be the starting point of analysis. As has in more general terms been observed by Kopytoff (1986), all buildings (whether vernacular or modern, bicycle shed or cathedral) are constructed, modified, renovated, updated and, ultimately, demolished. Throughout this process, the function, use and meaning of the buildings changes continuously. Each building therefore has its own biography or life history, which is written in line with the changing circumstances, expectations, insights and possibilities of their owners.

Similarly the building traditions that comprise individual buildings constitute processes of continuous change and adaptation. Despite persistent popular conceptualizations of a tradition as a package of ideas or practices that is handed down from generation to generation (and the associations of stasis that continue to accompany the concept), it is difficult to maintain that a tradition constitutes a bounded, de-personalized and unchanging body of knowledge or customs. Rather than as a fixed entity that exists independent of the people that transmit and live by it, a tradition is best regarded as a continuous creative process through which people, as active agents, negotiate, interpret and adapt knowledge and experiences gained in the past within the context of the challenges, wishes and requirements of the present. In this process (which Abu-Lughod (1992), following John Turner, referred to as 'traditioning'), existing ('traditional') skills, know-how and practices may be straightforwardly applied to deal with contemporary challenges, but they may also be adapted to better suit current needs, or indeed be rejected because they are no longer perceived as being relevant or useful. In the latter instances, it is not so much that the tradition is lost, but rather that is has been adjusted to comply with current circumstances. Tradition, then, is a process of active regeneration and transformation of know-how and practices within a contemporary local context, that does not exist on its own or apart from the people that transmit it.

Given this fundamental processual nature of buildings and building traditions, it is of course difficult, if not impossible, to identify and classify buildings as truly vernacular, informal, modern or popular. For what may be regarded as vernacular from an outsider's point of view (a west African palace, say, or a Japanese shrine), may be monumental or formal from an insider's perspective, while particular elements of traditions (for example, technologies, resources or forms) may be shared by popular and formal buildings, or by vernacular and informal ones. Conversely, what is generally seen as one of the quintessential popular house types in the United States and western Europe (the bungalow, a building type that, incidentally, evolved out of the conjunction of Bengal and British colonial traditions) can just as well be described as a 'suburban vernacular' (King 1995: 152). In a similar way, it is difficult to compartmentalize individual buildings, as what may initially be considered a vernacular building, can in the course of time be subjected to so many changes in its construction and use that it no longer fits the current definition (a sixteenth-century timber frame house in an English high street, for

example, repeatedly renovated and now used as a mobile phone shop). Again, the same could well be said for a popular house type such as the British suburban semi, many of which in the course of time have been subjected to so much individual adaptation that they may arguably be said to have been vernacularized (Oliver, Davis and Bentley 1981; Oliver 1984).

Engaging the future

As noted, the current pre-disposition of many scholars in the field is to regard as inauthentic, damaged or contaminated those vernacular buildings and traditions that show influences of modern, popular or formal traditions. Yet to do so is to deny the processual nature of buildings and building traditions, as well as that of the application of meaning, and indicates that many of those involved in the vernacular discourse are still unable to deal with the conjunction and transformation of traditional and modern elements that characterizes much of the world's architecture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The dominant tendency remains to keep the vernacular from development and change, whereas what we should be doing, I believe, is focus on the way in which those traditions that are now called vernacular actively and creatively combine with those called modern, popular and informal to create new buildings that suit contemporary and future requirements, needs and expectations. All buildings, whether traditional, modern or modernized hybrids, are authentic cultural expressions in themselves. Thus a Minangkabau house in West Sumatra (Indonesia) that is built of concrete and provided with a modern bathroom and garage as well as a traditional spired roof is no example of the contamination and decline of a vernacular building tradition, nor is it a 'fake', 'replica' or an 'imitation' of an older timber building. It represents a new phase in the living Minangkabau building tradition and as such it deserves as much attention and admiration as its older and supposedly more 'authentic' counterparts (Vellinga 2004a and 2004b). The same, I would argue, goes for an urban Mongolian yurt provided with a concrete base and electric lights, a Lakota sweat lodge used by both Native Americans and whites or, indeed, a Cotswold barn that is now used as a luxury weekend retreat by a successful stockbroker from London (Evans and Humphrey 2002; Bucko 1998; see also Jolly 1992).

Besides all such buildings should be regarded as vernacular in the sense that they are distinctive cultural expressions of people who live in or feel attached to a particular place or locality, and as such they form part of, or indeed help to constitute the local architectural dialect. A modernized Minangkabau house built by an emigrant living in Java is still distinctly Minangkabau, and a gentrified Cotswold barn owned by a London insurance advisor still distinctly Cotswold, despite the fact that they may serve similar purposes (as tourist accommodation, or holiday retreat) and may have been built or renovated using similar (modern) materials and technologies. The one can only be found in West Sumatra, and the other only in the Cotswolds. Both constitute distinctive cultural artefacts that relate to localized cultural needs, economies and values and that are, in their own and unique way, intimately related to the identities of their owners, builders and inhabitants, using available technologies and materials.

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Besides, both have developed out of the amalgamation and hybridization of traditional and modern elements, each having vernacularized the manifold manifestations of modernity in its own distinctive way. It is the way in which these processes of vernacularization take place, not just in West Sumatra and England, but in Mali, Mongolia, the Pacific, Ecuador, Canada and elsewhere that, I would argue, deserve much more attention from scholars of the vernacular. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is only by taking serious the ways in which the historic and the modern, the informal and the formal, the urban and the rural, the indigenous and the migrant, the traditional and the contemporary, and the popular and the monumental combine, interrelate and in the process become vernacularized that, to borrow Upton's (1990: 211) words, a 'more genuine architectural history' can be written.

A focus on the way in which old and new building traditions today merge and become vernacularized opens up a wide and largely unexplored field of research; a field in which current architectural categories, types and periods interrelate and overlap, and which is increasingly inhabited by contemporary buildings that, though unique and authentic in themselves, have still not received the academic and professional attention that they deserve. Writing about the anthropology of material culture and consumption, Miller (1995: 269) called for studies that would expunge the latent primitivism of the discipline by taking serious New Age Californians, Singaporean puritanism and 'West Africans in suits playing video games', so as to end 'that romantic nostalgia which had the effect of allowing only "western" peoples to be the true inheritors of the industrial revolution'. In a similar way, I believe that the field of vernacular architecture studies will need to break out of the bounds of its own static and, indeed, latent primitivist definitions by acknowledging and taking serious new and contemporary hybrid buildings such as Native American casinos, Japanese bio-regional eco-houses, contemporary North American log houses, Indonesian cultural heritage centres and lightweight concrete fantasy homes in Mexico, to name but a few (Krinsky 1996; Cohen *et al.* 2003; Skinner 2002; Vellinga 2004; Kahn 2004). Integrating such buildings and the emerging traditions to which they belong in the vernacular discourse will increase our understanding of the varied ways in which people built and live, providing better insight into how architecture is fundamentally involved in the constitution of cultural identities and how in time, and interdependently linked to such identities, traditions become established, change, adapt and ultimately endure or disappear. Besides it will help to discard the persistent images of the past and irrelevance that currently surround the vernacular and, as such, will allow for a more serious incorporation of vernacular know-how in modern and future building projects.

Of course, expanding the scope of the field of vernacular studies by incorporating the dynamic amalgamation of those traditions now called vernacular, modern, popular or formal should not inhibit us from studying or conserving the traditional and historical buildings that have so far received most attention. Such work constitutes a legitimate and invaluable part of the architectural history discourse and by all means should continue to help document and understand the

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rich and diverse architectural heritage of the world; especially since so many distinctive traditions and buildings are today faced with disappearance and destruction. But there is a need to complement these historical and traditional studies with an approach that more explicitly engages the future by looking at the ways in which contemporary building traditions from all around the world creatively adapt to current cultural and environmental contexts and processes. Not to want vernacular buildings and traditions to develop by proposing, like Rice, rigid preservation, and by condemning as contamination or adulteration any change or adaptation is to deny history and to make vernacular traditions all the more out-of-date, irrelevant and destined to disappear. On the other hand, unconditionally assuming that all change is good and to be regarded as a positive achievement is to ignore the manifold negative and, not infrequently, destructive consequences of a lot of modern development, and would inevitably result in a similar sad fate for the vernacular. What should be done to sidestep both of these extremes, is to develop an approach that acknowledges the existence of change and development, but that tries to understand how and why it takes place and attempts to ensure, through critical assessment and engagement, that the changes that are effected are sensible, appropriate and, most of all, sustainable.

Of course, such a dynamic, critical and more applied approach to the vernacular, taking its place alongside the current academic discourse, already exists, and in time has resulted in many important studies and projects (Fathy 1973; Cain *et al.* 1975; Afshar and Norton 1997). It now seems more important than ever to elaborate on this work, and to try and make it a major component of the vernacular discourse. Roland Barthes once spoke of 'a moment of gentle apocalypse' (Sontag 1982: xxii). Although referring to the literary climate of his time, his phrase seems to encapsulate the era of the early twenty-first century, which to a large extent is characterized by a worldwide, slow and gradual accumulation of both cultural and environmental transformations and problems. The process of globalization, typified by rapid developments in the field of ICT, increased mass consumption, continued urbanization and the growing internationalization of capital, business and power, around the world has led to profound cultural changes and dislocations, to new patterns of ethnic relationships and to the emergence of new hybrid cultures. At the same time it has contributed to increased environmental problems on a global scale, which may well result in a true ecological disaster and are exemplified by a rapid loss of natural resources and species, high levels of energy consumption, and increasing amounts of waste and pollution. It goes without saying that, as a prominent cultural category and a major consumer of energy and resources, the built environment, including the vernacular, is seriously implicated in both processes. As such, there has been a slowly growing interest among architects, planners and engineers in the design of architecture that can address the many environmental, economic and social problems in a sustainable way (e.g. Edwards and Turrent 2000; Williamson, Radford and Bennett 2002).

As Oliver (2003: 17) recently noted, as a source of 'much accumulated wisdom', vernacular traditions have the potential to contribute much to the development of such sustainable architecture. Like indigenous medicinal and

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agricultural knowledge (Ellen, Parkes and Bicker 2000), vernacular practices, skills and ideas, which have often developed over time as part of a continuous process of trial and error and are as such often well adapted to local climatic and cultural contexts, may offer many valuable lessons and precedents to the scholars and professionals involved in the development of sustainable buildings. Indeed, as a category the vernacular will *have* to be taken serious in this respect, as the vast majority of people in the world currently lives in vernacular buildings and is likely to continue doing so throughout the twenty-first century. Yet, as Oliver notes (2003: 14), in order for such recognition and integration of vernacular know-how in a modern or development context to materialize, much more applied research is needed. An essential premise of such research, I suggest, should be the explicit acknowledgement that all vernacular traditions constitute dynamic and creative processes that result from cultural encounters, borrowings and conjunctions, and that, as such, should be allowed to change and develop. For if the current static and conservative interpretations of the concept that confirm the vernacular stereotypes of a backward past and underdevelopment are maintained, the incorporation of vernacular traditions in new and modern projects is not likely to succeed or, indeed, to be taken serious.

As is shown by the work that already has been done (e.g. Fathy 1973), an approach that focuses on the active application of vernacular technologies, forms and resources in a modern and development context will not be without its problems, challenges and setbacks, and will have to address themes and issues that so far have been largely disregarded in the field of vernacular studies. For instance, as it will have to engage with, or indeed be part of, the so called 'development discourse' (Grillo 1997), there will be a need for critical discussions of the political and ethical dimensions of key concepts like sustainability, development, intervention and participation. At the same time there is an urgent need for research into more pragmatic issues that have so far not received much attention in the field of vernacular architecture studies, but which are nonetheless crucial in terms of the sustainable development of the vernacular. Forming part of the global 'ecumene' (Hannerz 1989), many of the vernacular builders of today are increasingly confronted with 'modern' issues like planning regulations, climate change, resources depletion, building performance standards, population growth, technology transfer and even, in some cases, mortgage restrictions and insurance criteria. So far, the implications of such practical issues on the way in which vernacular traditions are transmitted have hardly been the subject of research. Yet is only by critically examining the way in which the vernacular will be able to deal with these contemporary challenges that it will be possible to show that vernacular traditions are not necessarily just anachronistic survivals of an era destined to disappear, but may well have an opportunity to endure and contribute to a sustainable built environment of the future.

The end of the vernacular

Ultimately, like Upton (1990: 210–11) and Glassie (2000: 21), I believe that the category of vernacular architecture will be obsolete. This does not mean that we

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should discard of it as yet, because as an analytical concept it is useful and, as long as architectural history remains narrowly concerned with the study of great buildings and architects and does not recognize the importance of all building traditions in the world, it is much needed. Nor should it be taken to imply that the building traditions that are currently referred to as vernacular will no longer be useful or relevant in the future. Indeed, as noted, there is every reason to acknowledge that, as a source of know-how, the vernacular will still have an invaluable part to play in the creation of a sustainable built environment for all.

What is important in order to assess such a future role, however, is the explicit recognition that vernacular traditions, like their modern, informal, environmentally responsive or popular counterparts, constitute dynamic and creative processes of development and change. A limitation of much of the current field of vernacular architecture studies is that this active and processual nature is still not really acknowledged, as a result of which disruptive processes of decline and loss are emphasized, while contemporary examples of architectural continuity, revival and amalgamation tend to be disregarded. Although the buildings that are the result of these latter processes undoubtedly differ from the ones that preceded them, often combining traditional elements with modern ones, they are nonetheless distinctive cultural artefacts which, as authentic expressions in their own right, are uniquely related to the particular cultural and environmental context in which they are found. In that sense they are still vernacular, or in any case the outcome of the local vernacularization of modernity.

Recognizing the existence of these contemporary vernacular or vernacularized buildings alongside the historic and traditional ones that so far have been the main focus of the vernacular discourse, opens up a wide field of research; a contemporary, varied and exciting field in which new and enduring building traditions continue to come together in creative and new ways. Paying attention to this dynamic field will help to change the current 'thatched cottage and mud hut' image of vernacular studies and is a necessary first step on the road that needs to be taken if the incorporation of vernacular know-how in modern and development practice is to become a reality.

Ultimately, engaging the creative cross-fertilization of architectural periods, categories, ideas and practices, it may also enable a more comprehensive architectural history to be written. Such an architectural history, when it emerges, will have to accept that all building traditions in the world, regardless of their prefix or location, come into being, develop, adapt, combine, endure and disappear, and will no longer need to identify rigidly bounded and static categories to distinguish buildings that, in the end, are not fundamentally different from one another. It is only when the vernacular, like the modern, the popular, the colonial or the informal, has become analytically obsolete, that its existence and importance will truly have been recognized.