

Vernacular architecture

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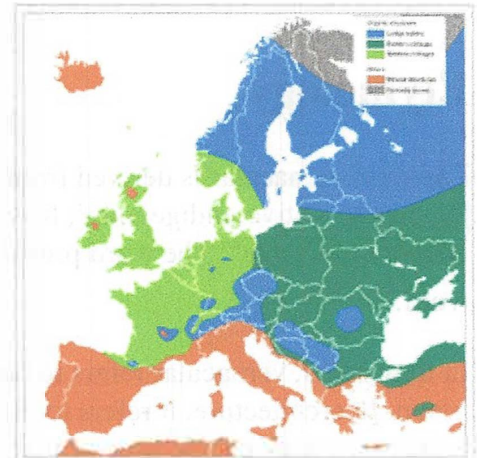
Vernacular architecture is an architectural style that is designed based on local needs, availability of construction materials and reflecting local traditions. At least originally, vernacular architecture did not use formally-schooled architects, but relied on the design skills and tradition of local builders. However, since the late 19th century many professional architects have worked in versions of this style.

It tends to evolve over time to reflect the environmental, cultural, technological, economic, and historical context in which it exists. While often difficult to reconcile with regulatory and popular demands of the five factors mentioned, this kind of architecture still plays a role in architecture and design, especially in local branches.

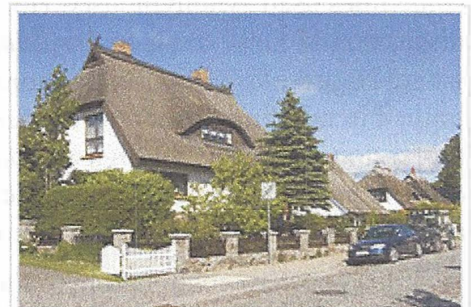
Vernacular architecture can be contrasted against polite architecture which is characterized by stylistic elements of design intentionally incorporated for aesthetic purposes which go beyond a building's functional requirements. This article also covers the term **traditional architecture**, which exists somewhere between the two extremes yet still is based upon authentic themes.^[1]

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Map of building materials used in European farmhouses: lodge cabins (blue), western and eastern cottages (light/dark green), mineral structures (orange) and nomadic zones (gray)



Traditional *Reethaus* with thatched roofs on Rugia Island, Germany.



The Shotgun house is an example of an American vernacular style: A pair of single shotgun houses, dating to the 1920s, in the Campground Historic District of Mobile, Alabama

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Etymology

The term vernacular is derived from the Latin *vernaculus*, meaning "domestic, native, indigenous"; from *verna*, meaning "native slave" or "home-born slave". The word probably derives from an older Etruscan word.^{[2][3][4]}

In linguistics, vernacular refers to language use particular to a time, place or group. In architecture, it refers to that type of architecture which is indigenous to a specific time or place (not imported or copied from elsewhere). It is most often applied to residential buildings.^{[5][6][7]}

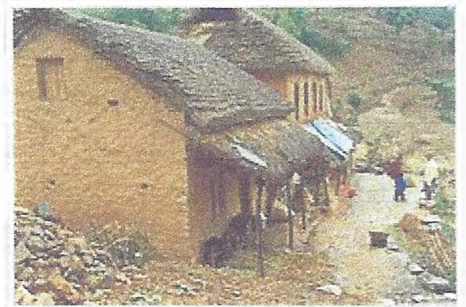
Definitions

The terms vernacular, folk, traditional, and popular architecture are sometimes used synonymously. However, Allen Noble wrote a lengthy discussion of these terms in *Traditional Buildings: A Global Survey of Structural Forms and Cultural Functions* where he presents scholarly opinions that folk building or *folk architecture* is built by "...persons not professionally trained in building arts..."; where *vernacular architecture* is still *of the common people* but may be built by trained professionals such as through an apprenticeship, but still using local, traditional designs and materials. *Traditional architecture* is architecture is passed down from person to person, generation to generation, particularly orally, but at any level of society, not just by common people. Noble discourages use of the term *primitive architecture* as having a negative connotation.^[8] The term popular architecture is used more in eastern Europe and is synonymous with folk or vernacular architecture.^[9]

Ronald Brunskill has defined the ultimate in vernacular architecture as:

...a building designed by an amateur without any training in design; the individual will have been guided by a series of conventions built up in his locality, paying little attention to what may be fashionable. The function of the building would be the dominant factor, aesthetic considerations, though present to some small degree, being quite minimal. Local materials would be used as a matter of course, other materials being chosen and imported quite exceptionally.^[10]

The vernacular architecture is not to be confused with so-called "traditional" architecture, though there are links between the two. Traditional architecture also includes buildings which bear elements of polite design: temples and palaces, for example, which normally would not be included under the rubric of "vernacular." In architectural terms, 'the vernacular' can be contrasted with 'the polite', which is characterised by stylistic elements of design intentionally incorporated by a professional architect for aesthetic purposes which go beyond a building's functional requirements. Between the extremes of the wholly vernacular and the completely polite, examples occur which have some vernacular and some polite content,^[11] often making the differences between the vernacular and the polite a matter of degree.



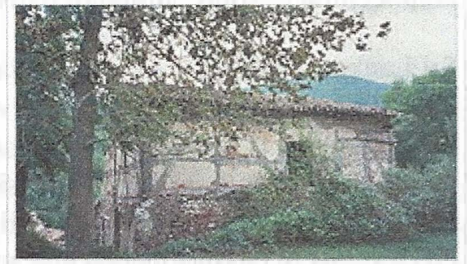
Stone and clay houses in rural Nepal



A traditional Batak house, Sumatra, Indonesia

The *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* defines vernacular architecture as:

...comprising the dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources they are customarily owner- or community-built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of life of the cultures that produce them.^[12]



Dwelling of half-timbered construction on stone foundation, La Rioja, Spain

Vernacular architecture is a broad, grassroots concept which encompasses fields of architectural study including aboriginal, indigenous, ancestral, rural, and ethnic architecture^[13] and is contrasted with the more intellectual architecture called polite, formal, or academic architecture just as folk art is contrasted with fine art.

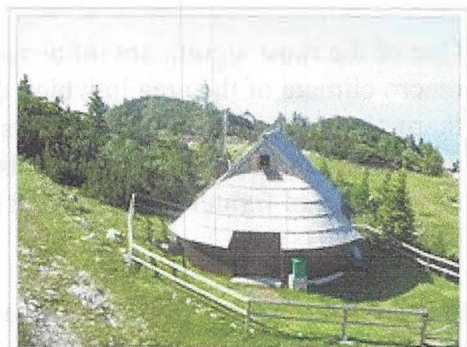
Vernacular and the architect

Architecture designed by professional architects is usually not considered to be vernacular. Indeed, it can be argued that the very process of consciously designing a building makes it not vernacular. Paul Oliver, in his book *Dwellings*, states: "...it is contended that 'popular architecture' designed by professional architects or commercial builders for popular use, does not come within the compass of the vernacular".^{[14]:15} Oliver also offers the following simple definition of vernacular architecture: "*the architecture of the people, and by the people, but not for the people*".^{[14]:14}

Frank Lloyd Wright described vernacular architecture as "Folk building growing in response to actual needs, fitted into environment by people who knew no better than to fit them with native feeling".^{[14]:9} suggesting that it is a primitive form of design, lacking intelligent thought, but he also stated that it was "for us better worth study than all the highly self-conscious academic attempts at the beautiful throughout Europe".

Since at least the Arts and Crafts Movement, many modern architects have studied vernacular buildings and claimed to draw inspiration from them, including aspects of the vernacular in their designs. In 1946, the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy was appointed to design the town of New Gourná near Luxor. Having studied traditional Nubian settlements and technologies, he incorporated the traditional mud brick vaults of the Nubian settlements in his designs. The experiment failed, due to a variety of social and economic reasons, but is the first recorded attempt by an architect to address the social and environmental requirements of building users by adopting the methods and forms of the vernacular.^{[14]:11}

In 1964 the exhibition *Architecture Without Architects* was put on at the Museum of Modern Art, New York by Bernard Rudofsky. Accompanied by a book of the same title, including black-and-white photography of vernacular buildings around the world, the exhibition was extremely popular. It was Rudofsky who first made use of the term vernacular in an architectural context, and brought the concept into the eye of the public and of mainstream architecture: "For want of a generic label we shall call it vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural, as the case may be."^[15]



A post-World War II dwelling at the Big Pasture Plateau, Slovenia, designed by the architect Vlasto Kopač and based on the vernacular architecture of this mountainous area.

Since the emergence of the term in the 1970s, vernacular considerations have played an increasing part in architectural designs, although individual architects had widely varying opinions of the merits of the vernacular.

Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa is considered the pioneer of regional modernism in South Asia. Along with him, modern proponents of the use of the vernacular in architectural design include Charles Correa, a well known Indian architect; Muzharul Islam and Bashirul Haq, internationally known Bangladeshi architects; Balkrishna Doshi, another Indian, who established the Vastu-Shilpa Foundation in Ahmedabad to research the vernacular architecture of the region; and Sheila Sri Prakash who has used rural Indian architecture as an inspiration for innovations in environmental and socio-economically sustainable design and planning. The Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck was also a proponent of vernacular architecture.^{[14]:13} Architects whose work exemplifies the modern take on vernacular architecture would be Samuel Mockbee, Christopher Alexander and Paolo Soleri.

Oliver claims that:

As yet there is no clearly defined and specialized discipline for the study of dwellings or the larger compass of vernacular architecture. If such a discipline were to emerge it would probably be one that combines some of the elements of both architecture and anthropology with aspects of history and geography^[14]

Influences on the vernacular

Vernacular architecture is influenced by a great range of different aspects of human behaviour and environment, leading to differing building forms for almost every different context; even neighbouring villages may have subtly different approaches to the construction and use of their dwellings, even if they at first appear the same. Despite these variations, every building is subject to the same laws of physics, and hence will demonstrate significant similarities in structural forms.

Climate

One of the most significant influences on vernacular architecture is the macro climate of the area in which the building is constructed. Buildings in cold climates invariably have high thermal mass or significant amounts of insulation. They are usually sealed in order to prevent heat loss, and openings such as windows tend to be small or non-existent. Buildings in warm climates, by contrast, tend to be constructed of lighter materials and to allow significant cross-ventilation through openings in the fabric of the building.

Buildings for a continental climate must be able to cope with significant variations in temperature, and may even be altered by their occupants according to the seasons.

Buildings take different forms depending on precipitation levels in the region – leading to dwellings on stilts in many regions with frequent flooding or rainy monsoon seasons. Flat roofs are rare in areas with high levels of precipitation. Similarly, areas with high winds will lead to specialised buildings able to cope with them, and buildings will be oriented to present minimal area to the direction of prevailing winds.

Climatic influences on vernacular architecture are substantial and can be extremely complex. Mediterranean vernacular, and that of much of the Middle East, often includes a courtyard with a fountain or pond; air cooled by water mist and evaporation is drawn through the building by the natural ventilation set up by the building form.



House in Brgule, Serbia