

Vernacular: From the Historical to the Contemporary Human Settlements

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This journal is related to vernacular architecture. In the scope of the journal mentioned in the Scopus Data Base, there is no such a term. Instead, it mentions the following.

Humanities: history, conservation, visual arts and performing arts

Engineering: Architecture

Anyone who knows vernacular will agree that these do not correspond to what vernacular architecture is. However, these have come to be there because, when the journal was being submitted to the Scopus Database for indexing, there was no term that could be selected to identify the vernacular: social and cultural aspects of architecture would have come closer, but there is no such category. That is how absent vernacular architecture from the formal structures of the academia, although a lot is being researched into traditions, cultures, and indeed the vernacular: people's own processes of existence and dwelling.

The closest we could select were the above, because often, vernacular is associated with the past: thus history. Vernacular is often also seen as part of the heritage and there are calls for conservation of them: thus conservation. Architecture undeniably is a visual art, and many productions in human settlements are visual arts: thus, visual arts. Moreover, vernacular settlements produce and sustain the traditions and culture themselves through performances such as festivals and rituals: thus, performing arts.

The second choice of Engineering came from the fact that architecture was under Engineering, although it should not be. We cannot change the way the world exists except to accept as it exists. Often, architecture is also seen as a kind of engineering, which is a misconception.

ISVS e-journal thus published on vernacular settlements in particular and human settlements especially in general deriving its primary connotation from the fact that vernacular is anything that people did for themselves: making food, making clothes, talking languages, managing their settlements by themselves are all vernacular acts. Despite this broader definition we adopted in choosing what to publish, strangely, as per the Scopus Data Base, the best quartile of ISVS e-journal in 2022 has been determined as being 'history'. Needless to say, this is a misrepresentation.

When this was discovered and a lot of authors sent papers to be published on history, ISVS e-journal took a decisive step to publish more on architecture so that its identification could be moved towards the built-environment or architecture rather than history. In so doing, it also adopted the broadest definition of vernacular, that it is anything and everything people produced in whatever settlements they lived in: this undeniably involves modern settlements and settings too.

Its position is that treating vernacular as ‘a thing of the past’, tribal villages, and remote rural settlements is not a theoretically justifiable position to adopt. Instead, it articulated how vernacular exists in the contemporary, modern world. That is what ISVS e-journal aspires to promote academically to interrogate so that we can construct a more holistic understanding of the vernacular processes and practices.

The Theoretical Position

Boudier and Alsayyad offer a fruitful discussion on the nuances of meanings associated with the dwellings that come about by everyday acts of people, under the rubric of tradition. Usually, the products of common people without professional intervention, many labels have been used to refer to such constructions. As Bourdier and Alsayyad point out, and now well-known, ‘vernacular’, ‘indigenous’, ‘primitive’, ‘tribal’, ‘folkloric’, ‘popular’, and ‘anonymous’ have been used to describe their characteristics (1989:5). As Oliver (1985) shows, numerous other terms are also used such as ‘non-literate’, ‘pre-literate’, ‘unsophisticated’ and even ‘architecture without architects’.

The most significant about these kinds of built environments however have been that they are products of ideas and practices handed down from one generation to another and have also had origins in the cultures of common people. Oliver who is an authority of vernacular architecture says that vernacular acquire their value through the deep symbolisms they are imbued with (Oliver,1975). Symbolisms, rituals, world views, superstition and beliefs enrich their meanings beyond everyday use values (Kus and Raharijaona, 1990; Bawden,1990). In fact, inherent among them is a great reverence to the mother earth and the cosmos, the power of which is acknowledged in the historical vernacular (Denyer,1978) but not in the contemporary. At another level, Alexander sees historical vernacular as being alive, wholesome, enriched with ‘a quality without a name’ (1979) and rising from patterns of places that represent people’s natural ways of being and doing things (1977). He argues that this way of building that existed for thousands of years is ‘timeless’ and has the capacity to produce wholesome places and heal the derelict environments of the world.

Rapoport’s seminal book, *House Form and Culture* (1969) is again a revered acknowledgement of the values of the vernacular and the ways in which culture is central to their making. As he shows, vernacular arises from the places in which they exist: all facets of the places and the people contribute in a complex manner to their making. Similarly, Denyer (1978) offers deep insights into the vernacular of the African sub continent, through which she articulates how they arise from the surrounding landscape, fused with the geography, and influenced by environment and the cultures of people. Fathy’s (1973) seminal work on traditional architecture of Egypt is a classic example of the architect’s interest in such buildings which existed in abundance in the Middle Eastern region. Similarly, Brunskill (2000) and Oliver (1985, 1987) have explored the vernacular of many regions of the world and demonstrate that simple peasant buildings do possess complex and deeper meanings and are articulated by unsophisticated yet refined technologies. These studies establish the supremacy of the historical vernacular and suggest an implied acceptance of buildings done by ordinary people in the past as being the only meaningful vernacular.

Historical Vernacular and Contemporary Vernacular

Not much has been explicitly discussed on the distinct differences between the historical vernacular and the contemporary vernacular, although Oliver (1999) has drawn attention to the overbearing reference to the past when talking about vernacular. In his Hepworth lecture to the Prince of Wales institute, Oliver has said ‘Vernacular architecture continues to be associated with the past’ (Asquith et.al, 2006:1). However, one particular work; that of Bourdier and Alsayyad (1989) stands out which has stemmed from a graduate seminar focused on the very similarities

and differences between the two. As Alsayyad writes in the preface, ‘this graduate seminar was primarily concerned with identifying linkages between two separate and usually distinct areas of study: vernacular rural dwellings, which interested Jean-Paul, and contemporary urban squatter settlements which interested me’ (1989:1). However, even in this publication, only 02 articles explore the contemporary vernacular while 13 are focused on the historical. Of the 02 dealing with the contemporary vernacular, one paper discusses the perceptions people have of a certain village which turns out to be about other significant people rather than the vernacular buildings, processes or the places (Kawi,1989). Interestingly, when dealing with the historical vernacular, the rudimentary structures are described in detail in terms of construction techniques, meanings of symbolisms attached to their making, spatial values, symbolisms and usage (For instance Lee,1989;Feldman,1989).

Many academics have implicitly made references to clarify the differences between the two. Again, it is the historical vernacular that has been more fully examined. For example, Habraken sees historical vernacular as outcomes dominated by making, where making and designing were the same. He says ‘most certainly, there was no separation of designing and making’ (1985:13) and that, improvements came about ‘by chance under the eyes of alert individuals’ (1985:12). Most importantly, ‘immediate interactions took place between people and the artifact’ (1985:13) and underwent ‘continuous transformations’ through many minds that ‘shared the form over a long time’ (1985:13).

On historical vernacular, Habraken writes ‘as in those of all developing countries – design service is neither available nor much needed. The user decides with the maker on the basis of conventional form; much in the way we found the farmer and the carpenter decide what to do’ (1985:23). This domain is always defined in reference to the accepted way of construction of built environments in the modern world; formal. In other words, there is an undeclared agreement in the contemporary society that the professional (formal) way of building is the norm and everything else is an exception. As Habraken writes, ‘the term ‘informal’, in urban residential construction is generally used for those activities that take place outside the official plans and projections and without required permits’ (1985:155). Contemporary Informal building however is not necessarily considered similar to the historical vernacular. Bourdier and Alsayyad for example write that ‘Vernacular in many parts of today’s world often cannot be considered indigenous because it relies on imported materials to achieve local styles’ (1989:6). Bourdier et.al. argue,

“In the third world countries, the overwhelming majority of urban poor live in traditional settlements. We often refer to these as ‘squatter’ or ‘informal’ settlements because we fail to see that behind those inadequate structures are traditional modes of existence, traditional lifestyles and traditional economies”.

Bourdier et.al., 1989:6

Indeed, many often subscribe to the notion of the supremacy of the historical vernacular as the legitimate. For example, in the forward to the ‘Vernacular architecture in the 21st century’, Alsayyad (2005) wrote, ‘More research also needs to be done on the assumed utility of vernacular knowledge in the field of housing, particularly in relation to solving the problems of urban squatters’ implying that squatter housing is somehow not vernacular and inferior. Hamdi’s seminal book ‘Housing without Houses’ (1991) written as a primer for dealing with low-income housing in an incremental manner is perhaps the only notable exception. Although Hamdi is not interested in vernacular *per se*, his attitudes and the treatment of the squatter and shanty settlements–contemporary vernacular–calls for understanding and valuing them as meaningful settlements in which people’s aspirations have been deeply invested. In a similar way, in referring to the slums and shanties, Rapoport (1988) has also said that ‘these settlements are the closest thing we have today to traditional vernacular’.

Kellett offers the most critical examination of the two and calls for treating the contemporary vernacular with the same appreciation of the historical vernacular. In the keynote speech to the ISVS 5 seminar, Kellett (2010) demonstrated the striking similarities between the two and argued that there are a great deal common between them. Based on previous works (Kellett,1995;Kellett and Napier, 1995), he argued that by looking at the processes of production of places, habitation and underlying social and societal dimensions, contemporary informal settlements, can indeed be understood more fully as ‘continuation of existing vernacular processes’ (Kellett, 2011). Nevertheless, contemporary vernacular remains unrecognized and ill defined. Alsayed writes, ‘we also need to know the significance of our own classification of emerging forms of squatting as a new vernacular’ (2005).

These distinctions however are not clear-cut and not all facets as listed must exist in any category of vernacular. Indeed, contemporary vernacular can even be a continuation of the historical vernacular and in such situations contemporary vernacular may exhibit just the same characteristics of the historical vernacular itself. When contemporary vernacular–buildings being constructed by people in the modern world–constitute the facets of the historical vernacular (either process or product characteristics) it is this kind of vernacular that is often cherished rather than the others. This explains why informal buildings, slums, shanties and ad-hoc structures of the cities and even rural areas are looked down upon while valuing those that have been handed down from generations.

A comparison between historical vernacular and contemporary vernacular could help understand these distinctions.

Historical Vernacular	Contemporary Vernacular
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based largely on traditions handed down from generation to generation; tradition revered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows some traditions handed down from the past but are based mostly on popular everyday practices.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes slowly and resists change. Holds on to the past dearly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapts to changes faster; does not resist alien ideas or practices.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practices are largely unself-conscious. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practices are more self-conscious.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Almost always indigenous: materials come from the place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not necessarily indigenous because often the materials come from outside.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carefully defined specific constructions; Ingenuity refined over time to perfection. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ad-hoc, makeshift constructions led by adaptations, hodge-podge of things and unrefined ingenuity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less innovative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More innovative.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possesses and protects core culture base; change happens in the periphery. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacks a core or has a fragile core susceptible to abrupt and decisive change.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produces and sustains values kept in high esteem in society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indulges in values considered low in modern societies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often possesses spaces and forms with qualities of balance, unity and wholesomeness enriched by deep emotional appeal and enchantment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Characterized by the compositions of forms and spaces with ad-hoc and uncanny makeup often yielding disorder, chaos and unpleasantness.

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