

VIVA VERNACULAR

Architecture without architects? Low Impact building guru BERNARD RUDOFSKY contemplates the origins and aesthetics of improvised housing traditions.

Architectural history, as taught in the West, has never been concerned with more than a few select cultures. Europe, stretches of Egypt, Anatolia — little more of the world than was known in the second century AD. And it is usually dealt with only in its late phases. Skipping the first fifty centuries, chroniclers present us with a full-dress pageant of “formal” architecture, as arbitrary a way of introducing the art of building as, say, dating the birth of music to the advent of the symphony orchestra. Although the dismissal of the early stages can be explained (though not excused) by the scarcity of monuments, the discriminative approach of the historian is mostly due to his parochialism.

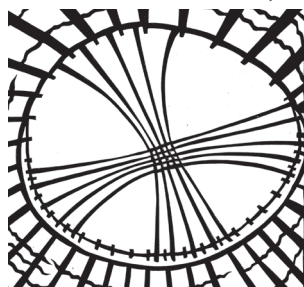
On the social plane, it amounts to little more than a who’s who of architects who commemorated power and wealth: an anthology of buildings of, by, and for the privileged — the houses of true and false gods, of merchant princes and princes of the blood — with never a word about the houses of lesser people. Today, when the copying of historical forms is on the wane, when banking houses or railway stations do not necessarily have to resemble prayers in stone to inspire confidence, such self-imposed limitation appears absurd.

The world of non-pedigreed architecture is so little known that we don’t even have a name for it. For want of a generic label we shall call it vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural, as the case may be. While we are reasonably well-informed about the artistic objectives and technical proficiency of painters who lived 30,000 years before our time, archaeologists feel lucky when they stumble over the vestiges of a town that goes back only to the third millennium BC. The Bible as a book of reference gives us Adam’s son Cain building a city named after his son Enoch. A one-family town, delightful as it sounds, is a most extravagant venture and surely was never repeated; yet it illustrates the breathtaking progress made in a single generation, from the blessed hummingbird existence in well-supplied Paradise to the exasperatingly complicated organism that is a town.

Sceptics who dismiss Enoch may find more significance in the Ark, commissioned by the Lord Himself and built to his specifications. Whether the Ark is called a building or a nautical craft is irrelevant. We may safely assume that ships were not known as yet, since their existence would have defeated the purpose of the Flood. When Noah landed on Mount Ararat he was 601 years old, and past his prime. Devoting himself to viniculture, he left the task of building to his sons. Shem’s huts bashed together with lumber from the Ark invented the principle of using local materials.

The impious, who may look to science for the origins of architecture, must swallow some unpalatable facts. Long before the first enterprising man, or probably woman, bent some twigs into a leaky roof, many animals were already

accomplished builders. It’s unlikely that beavers got the idea for building dams by watching human dam-builders at work. More likely, it was the other way round. Man perhaps learned to put up a shelter from his cousins, the anthropomorphous apes. Apes do not share man’s urge to seek shelter in a natural cave, or under an overhanging rock, but prefer an airy scaffolding of their own making. Darwin observed the Orang Utan, and chimpanzees, building the platforms on which they sleep. Also the Orang covering itself at night with *Pandanus* leaves. Suburban man falling asleep near his lawnmower, pulling a section of the Sunday newspaper over his head, thus re-enacts the birth of architecture.



Natural caves, coarsely modelled by the primeval forces of creation and occasionally polished by wind and water into elegant structures, hold a great fascination for us. Indeed caves, having been among man’s earliest shelters, may turn out to be his last ones. They have been chosen, with foresight, as depositories for our most precious artefacts — government and corporate files.

Exotic (more often dubbed “primitive”) arts are appreciated in the West, but exotic architecture is relegated to the pages of geographic and anthropological magazines. Lately though, since the art of travelling has suffered conversion into an industry, the charms of “picture-postcard” towns and the “popular” buildings of “fairy-tale” countries have attracted attention; still, our attitude is plainly condescending. Yet we may compare the serenity of the architecture in so-called under-developed countries with the architectural blight in industrial countries.

In orthodox architectural history, the emphasis is on the work of the individual architect; in the unorthodox, the accent is on communal enterprise, not produced by a few intellectuals or specialists but by the spontaneous and continuing activity of a whole people with a common heritage, acting under a community of experience.

These untutored builders show an admirable talent for fitting their constructions into the natural surroundings. Instead of trying to “conquer” nature, they welcome the vagaries of climate and the challenges of topography. Whereas we find flat, featureless country most to our liking, (any flaws in the terrain are easily erased by the application of a bulldozer), more perceptive people are attracted by rugged landscapes. In fact, they seek out the most complicated configurations: veritable eyries — Machu Picchu, Monte Alban, the craggy bastions of the monks’ republic on Mount Athos.

This tendency to build on sites of difficult access may come from a desire for security, but also a need to define a community’s borders. In the old world, many towns are still solidly enclosed by moats, lagoons, walls that have lost their defensive value. No hurdles to invaders, they still

GB, for Diggers & Dreamers’ Low Impact Communities in Britain, 2014

thwart undesirable expansion. A town that aspires to be a work of art must be as finite as a painting, a book, a piece of music. But our towns, with their air of futility, grow unchecked — an architectural eczema that defies all treatment. Ignorant as we are of the duties, culture and privilege of people who live in older civilisations, we accept chaos and ugliness as our fore-ordained fate, neutralising all misgivings about the inroads of bad architecture into our lives with vague inchoate grumbles.

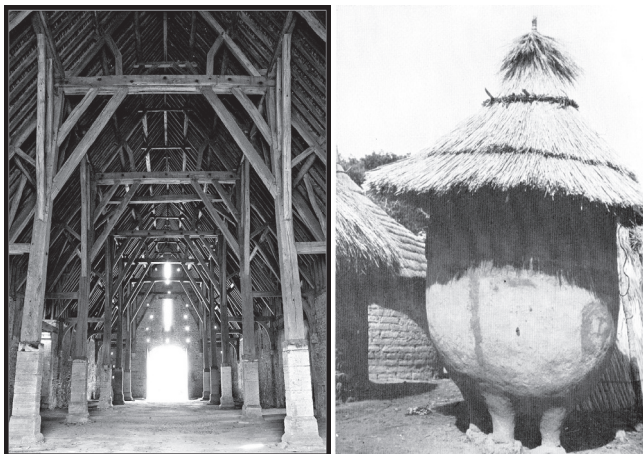


Inwards and downwards! Negative space becomes a positive home in a masterpiece of lateral thinking.

We ascribe to architects, and specialists generally, an exceptional insight into the problems of living, when, in fact, most of them are concerned with problems of business and prestige. The art of living is neither taught nor encouraged, more looked upon as a form of debauch, little aware that its tenets are frugality, cleanliness, and a general respect for creation, not to mention Creation.

To no small degree, this situation arises through historians invariably emphasising the parts played by architects and their patrons. They obscure the talents and achievements of the anonymous builders, whose concepts sometimes verge on the utopian, whose aesthetics approach the sublime. The beauty of this architecture has long been dismissed as accidental, but today we should be able to recognise it as the result of rare good sense in the handling of practical problems. The shapes of the houses, sometimes transmitted through a hundred generations, seem eternally valid, like those of their tools.

Above all, it is the *humaneness* of this architecture that ought to bring forth this response in us. For instance, it never occurs to us to make streets into oases rather than deserts. In countries where their function has not yet deteriorated into highways and car parks, a number of arrangements make streets fit for humans: pergolas, awnings spread across streets, whether tent-like structures or permanent roofs. The most refined street coverings, a tangible expression of civic solidarity, and philanthropy, are arcades, which go far beyond giving shelter from the elements or protecting pedestrians



Two granaries: the hand-hewn oak of the monastic tithe barn, left, and the thatched adobe of the Côte d'Ivoire are equally respectful of their contents. The monks' version, as magnificent as their church, suggests that food is at least as important as God.

from traffic. Besides bringing unity to the streetscape, they often take the role of the ancient forums. Bologna's streets, as one example, flaunt nearly twenty miles of *portici*.

Another form of the communal vernacular is the storehouse for food. In societies where food is looked upon as a divine gift rather than an industrial product, the architecture of granaries is solemn, and to the uninitiated might suggest ecclesiastical buildings. Such storehouses achieve monumentality; in view of their stylistic purity and precious content, they are quasi-sacred.

Architecture by subtraction, exemplified by troglodyte dwellings and free-standing buildings cut from live rock and hollowed out, is a sophisticated way of avoiding transporting materials — a minimalism also exemplified by nomads, whose lightweight portable dwellings embody a fine understanding of geometry, tensile forces, and the virtues and variabilities of organic materials. Houses on wheels and stilts, houseboats, sled-houses, all forms of tent evolving into the yurt; all manifesting the ingenuity and resourcefulness of imaginations unfettered by rules imposed from above. Then there is proto-industrial architecture, with water-wheels, windmills, and dovecots, those vital energy and fertiliser production units. Given the freedom to create from scratch, monotony of design just cannot occur.

There is a good deal of irony in the fact that to stave off physical and mental deterioration the urban dweller periodically escapes his splendidly appointed lair to seek bliss in what he thinks are primitive surroundings: a cabin, a tent, a fishing village or hilltop town abroad. Despite his mania for mechanical comfort, his chances for finding relaxation hinge on its very absence. Life in old-world communities is singularly privileged. Instead of several hours of daily travel, only a flight of steps may separate a man's workshop or study from his living quarters. Since he himself helped to shape and preserve his environment, he never seems to tire of it. Besides, he is largely indifferent to "improvements". Just as a child's toys are no substitute for human affection, to him no technical contrivance makes amends for a lack of liveability.

Thus the philosophy and know-how of the anonymous builders presents the largest untapped resource for architectural inspiration for industrial humanity. This wisdom goes beyond economic and aesthetic considerations, for it touches the far tougher and increasingly troublesome problem of how to live and let live, and how to keep peace with one's neighbours, both in the parochial and the universal sense.

Bernard Rudofsky (1905-1988) is best known as the author of Architecture Without Architects, a seminal photographic exhibition and book (Academy Editions, 1964) from which this extract is taken. He also wrote Streets For People and The Prodigious Builders: Notes toward a Natural History of Architecture with Special Regard to Those Species That are Traditionally Neglected or Downright Ignored.

Also highly recommended: Dwellings: The House Across The World, by Paul Oliver, Phaidon 1987, and all of Lloyd Khan's books — Shelter and Home Work.