Modernism and the Vernacular 1900-Present
Regionalism, Tradition, Identity, and Resistance

“The true basis for any serious study of the art of Architecture till lies in those indigenous, more humble buildings everywhere that art to architecture what folklore is to literature and folk song to music and which academic architects were seldom concerned. . . . These many folk structures are of the soil, natural. Though often slight, their virtue is intimately related to the environment and to the heart-life of the people. Functions are usually truthfully conceived and rendered invariably with natural feeling. Results are often beautiful and always instructive.”

—Frank Lloyd Wright, 1910 (Wasmuth Portfolio)

“Architecture is the result of the state of mind of its time. We are facing an event in contemporary thought: an international event, which we didn’t realize ten years ago; the techniques, the problems raised, like the scientific means to solve them, are universal. Nevertheless, there will be no confusion of regions: for climatic, geographic, topographical conditions, the currents of race and thousands of things still today unknown, will always guide solutions toward forms conditioned by them.”

—Le Corbusier, Precis, 1930.

“Stories of origin are far more telling of their time of telling than of the time they claim to tell.”

—Robin Evans

This class explores the intersections between modern architecture and what is sometimes called “vernacular” building from the early twentieth century to the present. Other adjectives that have been used to describe buildings erected by non-architects (though often with considerable qualification) are “indigenous,” “spontaneous,” “anonymous,” “informal,” “folk,” “popular,” “rural,” and “primitive.” This interest in vernacular forms also relates directly to concerns for “tradition” and “regionalism,” which modern architects have either embraced or dismissed with seemingly equal fervor.

The working hypothesis of the seminar is that modern architecture, despite its commitment to technology and modernization, was deeply involved with ideas about vernacular buildings, and that the nature and meaning of this fascination with indigenous structures changed in the course of the century. In the early twentieth century, architects such as Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos, saw these “non-designed” buildings as a models of functionalism and aesthetic simplicity: both traditional residences and industrial buildings represented a kind of “truth value” in contrast to the artifice and eclecticism of nineteenth-century academic architecture. The interest in
traditional domestic architecture gained even greater force during the Depression and political crises of the 1930s, when many saw rural and non-Western cultures as an alternative to and critique of European and North American materialism and technological modernization. After World War II, the interest in indigenous buildings became even more widespread among Western architects and the general public, resulting in a series of books and exhibitions, which culminated in the 1960s with the publication of Bernard Rudofsky’s *Architecture without Architects* (1964) and Paul Oliver’s *Shelter and Society* (1969). Shortly thereafter, however, an appreciation of what is sometimes called the “commercial vernacular” emerged, especially in the United States, spurred by the publication of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). The rise of postmodern architecture in the 1970s and 1980s also brought a new interest in regionalism and tradition, leading many architects to consider other qualities besides functionalism and volumetric simplicity in vernacular buildings, such as ornament and decoration, materials and craft techniques, and urban configurations. In non-western and postcolonial societies, an interest in regionalism and tradition also led to a rediscovery and renewed appreciation of indigenous architecture, though often taking on a different meaning than it did in Europe and North America: it became a symbol of both cultural identity and resistance. In some cases, it also represented a more realistic way to build, one that was less expensive, that employed readily available materials, and that relied on local labor and existing construction practices. The concluding section of the class will be devoted to the work of some contemporary architects working outside of Europe and North America, such as that Amateur Architecture Studio (Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu), Francis Kéré, and Marina Tabassum,; these architects often use and adapt vernacular forms, materials, and building techniques while exploring distinctly modern approaches to design and construction.

Class structure and requirements: This seminar has two major components: (1) close readings and discussion of seminal texts raising issues relevant to vernacular architecture and its influence on modern architecture and (2) student presentations of design work that was inspired or in response to vernacular buildings or of seminal exhibitions or books. The topics covered each week will depend in part on students’ research interests. Besides leading the discussion of one reading, students are expected to make three presentations in the course of the semester: the first dealing with the period before 1950, the second concerning the period from 1950 to 1970, and the third with architecture and theory since 1970s. In addition, students are required to write a research paper of approximately fifteen pages, due at the end of the semester. The paper topics can either be drawn from the subjects below or can be chosen by the student in consultation with the professor. Students should select their paper topic by October 12 and meet with Mary McLeod at least once in the course of the semester to discuss it. A preliminary synopsis and bibliography should be submitted to her before November 2.

Guest lectures: In the course of the semester there will also be a series of guest speakers who will discuss some of the topics in the class.

Readings: The topics and readings for the different sections will vary somewhat, depending on student presentations, although some readings will be required each week. Students should try to do the first week’s readings prior to the first class. Most shorter readings (less than 40 pages) will be posted on Canvas (Courseworks 2), and assigned books will be placed on the seminar shelf in Avery. Books marked with an * have been ordered for purchase at Book Culture at
112th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam. However, cheaper copies of these books, as well as books that are out-of-print, can often be found online. Besides sites such as Amazon and Abebooks, students may want to look at Bookfinder for used books.

**Week 1. Introduction: Theories of vernacular and early examples of “rediscovery”**


Recommended:


**Weeks 2 and 3. Early twentieth-century explorations**

a. Adolf Loos, Villa Karm (1903–06), Villa Khuner (1930)

b. Schultze-Naumberg, Tessenow, Muthesius, Hellerau, *Heimat* (talk by Theresa Harris)

c. Werkbund and industrial vernacular
d. Le Corbusier, *Voyage à l’orient*


*Le Corbusier, Journey to the East*, ed. and trans. Ivan Zaknic with Nicole Pertirist (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987). Owing to copyright restrictions, the whole text is not on courseworks, a copy is on the seminar shelf and the book has been ordered for purchase at Book Culture. Students are encouraged to read the whole book but should be sure to read the chapter “The Stamboul Disaster.”


Recommended:


**Weeks 4 and 5. The 1930s and the rediscovery of the vernacular**

a. Le Corbusier: 5 Houses, Ghardaia; Perriand, folklore (Georges-Henri Rivière)


c. Taut, *The Japanese House*, Perriand, Japan (40s)

d. Eldem, *The Turkish House*

e. Breuer, Gropius, Raymond, and American wood construction (Elizabeth Mock, *Built in the U.S.A.*)


or

_____*, “Ghosts and Barbarians: The Vernacular in Italian Modern Architecture and Design,”* *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 335–58. This essay gives a broader time span than the section in *Pride in Modesty* and is more concise (so depending on one’s preference I might recommend reading this).


Kevin Murphy, “The Vernacular Moment,” *JSAH* 70, no. 3 (September 2011): 308–29.


Recommended:


Weeks 6 and 7. The 1940s

a. The war and scarcity: Refugee housing (Le Corbusier, Les Murondins)

b. Bay Area style: Mumford, H.H. Harris

c. Hassan Fathy, New Gourna

d. Costa and Brazilian colonial architecture

e. Englishness, the pub, *Architectural Review*


“In Inside the Pub,” *Architectural Review* 106, no. 634 (October 1949); see to the pub competition the following year the magazine sponsored

Recommended:


**Weeks 8 and 9. The 1950s**

a. Scandinavian modernism/New Empiricism

b. Cullen, de Wolfe, Townscape

c. Neo-realism, Tiburtino

d. Spontaneous architecture (Triennale, 1951), rediscovery of Italian Hill towns, Bastide towns

e. Ecochard, ATBAT, Morocco and Algeria

f. Aldo van Eyck, Herman Haan, Dogon

g. Konastantinidis, *Old Athenian Houses*

h. Stirling, regionalism, Maisons Jaoul, Ham Common (with James Gowan)

i. Smithson’s, the ordinary, Sugden House

j. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture*

k. Colin Rowe and John Hedjuk, “Lockhart, Texas”

l. Juan O’Gorman, “Cave” House


Recommended:


Weeks 10 and 11. The 1960s

a. Drexler, Gropius, Tange, Engel, rediscovery of Katsura and traditional Japanese architecture.

b. Rudofsky, Architecture without Architects, 1964

c. John Turner, barriadas, informal architecture, Previ competition


e. The return to the street, Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of the American City, 1961

f. Lina Bo Bardi and the Brazilian Northeast

g. Safdie, Habitat, Jerusalem
h. Corporate architecture, the New Vernacular” *Architectural Review* (1950s and ’60s)

i. Pancho Guedes, Mozambique, East Africa, South Africa

j. Julian Beinart, South Africa

k. Myron Goldfinger, *Villages in the Mediterranean Sun*, 1969

l. Counter-culture and the Vernacular: “Funk Architecture”


Recommended:


Week 12. From the 1960s to the 1990s (postmodernism)

a. The Strip and commercial vernacular: J. B. Jackson; Peter Blake *God’s Own Junkyard*, 1964; Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*; Charles Moore and Disneyland, Banham and Los Angeles


c. Kenneth Frampton, “Critical Regionalism”

d. Liane Lefaivre, “Dirty Realism”

e. Architecture of the everyday, ordinariness, Henri efebvre


J.B. Jackson, “The Westward Moving House,” *Landscape* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1953) and “Other-Directed Houses,” *Landscape* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1956–57): 29–35; reprinted in J.B. Jackson,

Vincent Scully, The Shingle Style Today: Or the Historians Revenge (New York: Braziller, 1974), pp. 1–42, passim. (Please look at images which are not posted on courseworks. The book is on the seminar shelf.)


Recommended:

Douglas Haskell, “Architecture and Popular Taste,” Architectural Forum 109, no. 2 (August 1958): 105-109; reprinted with an introduction by Gabrielle Esperdy in Places, May 2015, pp. 1–14. (Note: even though Haskell’s essay was written much earlier, this essay might be seen as a precedent for some of the writings about popular taste in the 1970s.)


Week 13. From the 1980s (Postmodernism) to the Present

Note: Case studies and readings will depend on student selections.

Mimar magazine

India: Charles Correa, B. V. Doshi, Laurie Baker

Sri Lanka: Geoffrey Bawa, Minette de Silva
New Guinea: Renzo Piano, Tijbaou Cultural Center

China: Amateur Architecture Studio (Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu)

Burkina Faso: Francis Kéré

Bangladesh: Bashirul Haq, Marina Tabassum

U.S.: Rural Studio

Lagos: Koolhaas

Vietnam, Vo Trong Nghia

Greece, Point Supreme


Vikramaditya Prakash, “Identity Production in Postcolonial Indian Architecture: Re-Covering What We Never Had,” in Nalbantoglu and Wong, Postcolonial Space(s), pp. 39-52.


Recommended:


Bibliography


Philip Goad, Patrick Bingham-Hall, and Anoma Pieris, New Directions in Tropical Asian Architecture (Balmain, N.S.W.: Pesaro, 2004).


