Vernacular Architecture in the Twenty-First Century
Theory, education and practice

Edited by Lindsay Asquith
and Marcel Vellinga
Vernacular Architecture in the Twenty-First Century

At the dawn of a new millennium, in a time of rapid technological developments and globalization, vernacular architecture still occupies a marginal position. Largely ignored in architectural education, research and practice, recognition of the achievements, experience and skills of the world’s vernacular builders remains limited. Faced with the persistent denial of the importance of vernacular architecture, questions about its function and meaning in the twenty-first century present themselves.

This book, written by authors from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, aims to give the initial impetus to discussions about the way in which the vernacular can play a part in the provision of future built environments. Analysing the value of vernacular traditions to such diverse fields as housing, conservation, sustainable development, disaster management and architectural design, the contributors argue that there are valuable lessons to be learnt from the traditional knowledge, skills and expertise of the vernacular builders of the world.

The contributors argue for a more processual, critical and forward-looking approach to vernacular research, education and practice. Drawing on case studies from around the world, they aim to show that such an approach will enable the active implementation of vernacular know-how in a contemporary context, and will show that there still is a place for vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century.

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Edited by Lindsay Asquith and Marcel Vellinga
Dedicated to Paul and Valerie Oliver
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Marcel Vellinga is Research Director of the International Vernacular Architecture Unit at Oxford Brookes University. He is the author of Constituting Unity and Difference: Vernacular Architecture in a Minangkabau Village (2004) and of various articles dealing with the anthropology of architecture in Indonesia. He is currently co-editing, with Paul Oliver, the Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World.
Preface

The compilation of this book began as a tribute to Paul Oliver. We have both had the privilege of working with Paul for a number of years and his knowledge and experience have been not only an inspiration, but an essential part of our education in the field of vernacular architecture studies. His dedication, commitment and enthusiasm for a subject which is often marginalized, if not ignored, is unparalleled.

Paul’s late wife Valerie was instrumental in the planning stages of this volume, and we are indebted to her for her knowledge of the peoples, places and events that all contributed to the journey she and Paul undertook to heighten understanding and knowledge of the building traditions that exist among the many cultures and habitats throughout the world. She is greatly missed by us as a colleague, mentor and friend.

The authors represented in this book by no means make up an exhaustive list of specialists in the field of vernacular architecture. Many have written on the subject for a number of years and some are just beginning their work in the field, but all are committed to the education and transfer of knowledge that is imperative if the field of vernacular architecture studies is to grow and achieve the importance it deserves. Working in such diverse fields as architecture, planning, housing, urban studies, anthropology and folklore studies, they also represent the multi-disciplinary nature of the discourse.

We would like to thank all of the authors for their valuable contributions to this book and especially want to acknowledge the intended contribution by Jeffrey Cook, who sadly passed away before the completion of his chapter on climate change and the vernacular. We also thank Nezar AlSayyad for agreeing to write the foreword to this volume, and of course Paul Oliver for the afterword. We would also like to acknowledge the support of our families in this endeavour and especially Zita Vellinga for the compilation of the bibliography and index. We also express our gratitude to Caroline Mallinder and her team at Taylor & Francis, for supporting the project from the beginning and the valuable assistance they have given us.

Our aim in all of this is to further the debate on the importance of vernacular architecture studies now and throughout the twenty-first century, not as a study of past traditions, but as a contribution to new methods, solutions and achievements for the future built environment. If this is achieved it will be to the
Preface

credit of not only those that contributed to this work, but to all those involved in the field, academics and practitioners alike, whose integrated and dynamic approaches will ensure that the vernacular does not stand still, but continues to influence and enhance the world we live in.

Lindsay Asquith and Marcel Vellinga, February 2005
Foreword

Nezar AlSayyad

Vernacular architecture is a nineteenth-century invention. As a category of scholarship, its presence has been consolidated in courses and research programmes in the academy in the last two decades of the twentieth century. However, it has remained a considerably unknown subject in the arenas of public and policy discourses.

What would a vernacular architecture for the twenty-first century look like? Will the discussion of it be different or more influential? Will vernacular architecture simply disappear? Or will everything simply be classified as vernacular? These are the challenges of vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century and this important book attempts to address some of them.

As someone who has been involved in the study of the vernacular for a quarter of a century, I am often asked to define the vernacular. But while there are many operational definitions of the vernacular, the first challenge we must confront is the etymological and epistemological limitations of the concept. The many members of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE), which I co-founded eighteen years ago, have taken on this particular challenge.

Etymologically, for anything to be considered vernacular, it has always been assumed that it must be native or unique to a specific place, produced without the need for imported components and processes, and possibly built by the individuals who occupy it. In the twenty-first century, as culture and tradition are becoming less place-rooted and more information-based, these particular attributes of the vernacular have to be recalibrated to reflect these changes.

Epistemologically, or with regard to our ways of knowing and classifying, the meaning of the vernacular also has to change. For example, the idea of modern knowledge as different from, and possibly opposite to, vernacular knowledge should be abandoned as we recognize that the vernacular in some instances may in fact be the most modern of the modern. Many years ago at the first IASTE conference, Y.-F. Tuan argued that tradition is often a product of the absence of choice. As such, we must come to terms with the nature of constraint in the practices of the vernacular. We must accept that the gradual change that occurs in vernacular architecture over long periods of time is not a result of conservative practices and aesthetics but simply of geographic or economic limitations that cannot be overcome by a segment of the local population of a region.

Another major challenge we have to face in the twenty-first century concerns our methods. Here I am not only referring to what we do as scholars in
various disciplines when we go out in the field, but also what we choose to focus on in our study. Again, at the first IASTE conference, Paul Oliver argued that there is no such thing as a traditional building but rather buildings that embody certain vernacular traditions. He urged us to focus our attention on the practice of transmission as a way of understanding the vernacular and maintaining it. Oliver’s advice is still valid; the only difference, perhaps, is that the practices of transmission have changed considerably in an era of technological advancement and increased communication. We should no longer assume that vernacular builders are unskilled, illiterate, technologically ignorant or isolated from the world of global communication.

The last but most important challenge that we as scholars of the vernacular have to face concerns the utility of our labour. Of course, research about the vernacular is valuable in and of itself as a field of humanistic discourse. But researchers of the vernacular, as attested by the contributors to this book, are not simply satisfied with the status quo. If earlier work on the vernacular consisted primarily of object-oriented, socially-oriented or culturally-oriented studies, the direction outlined by this book is a new one that I could call activist-oriented studies. With such studies, there is a recognition of the limitations of the vernacular, and of the reasons why the professional community continues to shun it. More research on these issues will be needed.

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. The connection between the two areas of knowledge is not yet well established. In addition, further research should be done on the sustainability of vernacular settings. As some of the contributors to this book suggest, some vernacular forms are neither sustainable nor efficient and I would indeed add that they are often unaffordable. We also need to know the significance of our own classification of emerging forms of squatting as a new vernacular.

We should not be left with the belief that everything is vernacular yet nothing is vernacular any more. As I have argued in the last few years, the vernacular is not dead, and it has not ended. What has ended, or should end, is our conception of it as the only harbinger of authenticity, as the container of specific determined cultural meaning, as a static legacy of a past. What will emerge, I hope, is a vernacular as a political project, a project whose principal mission is the dynamic interpretation and re-interpretation of this past in light of an ever-changing present. This, I believe, would be a vernacular architecture worthy of the twenty-first century.

Berkeley, September 2005
Introduction

Lindsay Asquith and Marcel Vellinga

In his Hepworth Lecture entitled 'Vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century', read for the Prince of Wales Institute in 1999, Paul Oliver draws attention to the fact that, at the dawn of the new century, vernacular architecture still occupies a marginal position (Oliver 1999). Recognition and support from professionals and policymakers involved in the fields of architecture and housing is still not forthcoming. Vernacular architecture continues to be associated with the past, underdevelopment and poverty, and there seems to be little interest among planners, architects and politicians in the achievements, experience and skills of the world’s vernacular builders or the environmentally and culturally appropriate qualities of the buildings they produce. Native American pueblos, Indonesian longhouses or West African family compounds may be admired for their conspicuous design, functionality or aesthetic qualities, but they are hardly ever regarded as relevant to current housing projects. More often than not, vernacular houses are regarded as obstacles on the road to progress, which should be replaced by house types and living patterns that fit western notions of basic housing needs but which are adverse to the norms, wishes and values of the cultures concerned.

As Oliver points out, this attitude towards vernacular architecture is short-sighted. At the beginning of a new century, a major challenge facing the global community is to house the billions of people that inhabit the world, now and in the future, in culturally and environmentally sustainable ways. Current estimates predict an increase of the world’s population to approximately 9 billion people in 2050, all of whom will need to be housed. Though actual numbers do not exist and estimates vary, vernacular dwellings, built by their owners and inhabitants using locally available resources and technologies, according to regulations and forms that have been handed down and adapted to circumstances through local traditions, are presently believed to constitute about 90 per cent of the world’s total housing stock (Oliver 2003: 15). The problem of housing the world has not yet attracted the amount of attention paid to issues of health, food, climate change or the depletion of biodiversity, Oliver notes, yet it is one that will have to be recognized and faced by governments and other policymakers if the future well-being of the global population is to be ensured. In order to meet the unprecedented demand for houses, he writes, it is essential that vernacular building traditions are supported; to assist local builders in matters of sanitation and disaster preparedness, while at the same time learning and benefiting from their experience, knowledge and skills (1999: 11; see also Oliver 2003: 258–63).
The serious issue of global housing and, more particularly, the positive contribution that vernacular architecture could make to it cannot be ignored by those professionally involved in the fields of planning and housing. Furthermore, it should not be ignored by the media and academia. As in politics and policy-making, much media attention is paid to environmental, food and health issues but, as the agenda and news coverage of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg has shown (e.g. United Nations 2001), comparatively little thought is given to matters of housing. At an academic level, the inter-disciplinary field of vernacular architecture studies has admittedly grown significantly in the last decades of the twentieth century, with important and sometimes pioneering work done by architects, anthropologists and geographers. Yet, as Oliver notes, there are few academic courses or educational resources available to students, and formal recognition among scholars involved in these and other fields is still lacking.

Oliver’s paper addresses an important issue and asks for a further elaboration of the future role and importance of vernacular traditions. The problem of housing a rapidly increasing world population constitutes a major concern for mankind, yet it is not the only challenge to be faced in the twenty-first century. Environmental crises and climate change; processes of economic and political globalization; cultural interaction and conflicts caused by migration, tourism and war; and rapid technological developments constitute some of the other major issues that profoundly effect the way in which the world is perceived, organized and lived in at the beginning of the new millennium. Each of these issues has major social and cultural implications, and all of them relate in one way or another to vernacular traditions. Important questions regarding the function and meaning of vernacular traditions therefore arise for those involved in the field of vernacular architecture studies: how, for instance, will vernacular traditions be affected by the ecological, cultural and technological changes? What part can they play in them? Will they be able to respond or adapt in order to come to terms with the new ecological and cultural circumstances, or will they be forced to disappear, as so many traditions already have done in the course of the last century? Are particular elements of traditions more susceptible to change or preservation than others? Can certain changes more easily be incorporated than others, and will there be regional or cultural differences? In short: is there still a place for vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century?

It will be noted that such questions are not new or specific to the beginning of the twenty-first century, because cultures and vernacular building traditions have always been dynamic and changing. Yet, it is important that they are addressed, not only because of the global scope and unparalleled pace of the changes, but also because doing so will help to increase the academic, professional, political and public awareness of the importance and relevance of vernacular architecture, and as such may lead to the disposal of its stigma of a backward past, poverty and underdevelopment. Despite popular conceptions to the contrary, vernacular building traditions are not remnants of an underdeveloped or romantic past, but are of importance and relevance to many cultures and peoples in the
world, past, present and future. From a purely academic point of view, an understanding of the way in which vernacular traditions respond and react to ecological, technological and cultural changes will offer better insights in the nature of traditions and the processes of change that at different times and in various parts of the world have led to the disappearance, adaptation, revival or endurance of such traditions. From a more practical and professional perspective, such insights may help us to identify how vernacular architecture may best play a part in current and future attempts to create an appropriate and sustainable built environment for all.

As the contributions to follow show, the issues surrounding the potential, function and meaning of vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century are complex and extensive. This book is not intended to address them all, but aims to give the initial impetus to discussions that will hopefully result in a greater understanding and acknowledgement of the future importance of vernacular traditions. The subject is explored through chapters that each address an important aspect of vernacular architecture or reflect on the academic and professional discourse on it, dealing with issues such as theory, education, sustainability, housing, disaster management, conservation and design. Written by authors from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, the chapters aim to provide an overview of the current state of affairs regarding the study of vernacular architecture and attempt to indicate how vernacular traditions relate to, and perhaps may contribute to the way one may deal with, some of the major issues facing the global community in the coming age. As such, they are hoped to become a starting-point for future research and education. Although vernacular architecture studies is emerging as a promising and fascinating area of study in recent years, much still needs to be done, both theoretically, methodologically and through recording and documentation, before the relevance of vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century can be acknowledged and understood.

**Vernacular architecture studies and the future**

As Oliver (1997b: xxiii) has noted, ‘research in vernacular architecture may have to wait some time before it has an historian’. Still, generally speaking, it can be said that the interest in vernacular architecture in the sense of non-classical and non-western buildings can be traced back to the eighteenth century, while the first scholarly analyses of vernacular architecture as rural, non-monumental and pre-industrial traditions started to appear in the late nineteenth century (Upton 1990 and 1993; Oliver 1997b). Many of these early studies were made in Europe and the US, often by antiquarians and architects who were influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement. Writings of this period on the vernacular traditions of the non-western world were often embedded in the accounts of the many travellers, missionaries and colonial officials who, in a time of rapid colonization and scientific exploration, were scattered around the world and encountered buildings that were often fundamentally different from the ones they were familiar with back home. In both cases, many of the studies were ‘tinged by nostalgia’ for traditions that, though often in decline, were regarded as examples of functionalist aesthetics and that, consequently, were often seen to serve as sources of inspiration for contemporary
design (Oliver 1997b: xxiii). Not infrequently in such accounts, vernacular buildings were seen as 'more innocent, natural or spontaneous, and therefore truer' than, if not superior to, their later counterparts (Upton 1990: 200).

Although many of these early studies, particularly those dealing with western traditions, were used as a means to evade and criticise contemporary architectural practice, they usually did not pay much explicit attention to the way in which the traditions concerned might contribute to the creation of future built environments. Nor (leaving aside notable exceptions such as Morgan (1965)) did they focus much on the ways in which the vernacular traditions related to the cultures of which they formed part. On the whole their interest was in the documentation, classification and naming of historic or traditional forms, plans, materials and styles, most of which (especially in the case of non-western traditions) were regarded as destined to disappear. This tendency to focus on the documentation and preservation of traditions that were regarded as more spontaneous, instinctive and true, without paying much attention to cultural context or, indeed, the future potential of the traditions concerned, persisted well into the twentieth century (e.g. Rudofsky 1964). The late 1960s, however, saw the publication of a number of seminal works that, by stressing the importance of studying the vernacular within its historic and cultural context, sought to free the vernacular from its associations with anonymity, nostalgia and the past, and explicitly stressed the part that vernacular traditions may play in the provision of more sustainable settlements and buildings for the future (Oliver 1969; Rapoport 1969). Written in a time of rapid modernization, these studies provided a major research impetus and contributed greatly to the increased recognition of vernacular architecture studies as a multi-disciplinary field of academic and professional interest.

The ever-growing number of studies that has continued to appear since this time has greatly increased our knowledge and understanding of historic and contemporary vernacular traditions, both in the western and non-western world (e.g. Glassie 1975; Upton and Vlach 1986; Bourdier and AlSayyad 1989; Turan 1990). Yet despite this undeniable increase, it can be argued that at the beginning of the twenty-first century interest in vernacular traditions is still rather marginal and more obvious in some parts of the world than others, while the numerical representation of scholars from different disciplines remains uneven. Besides, ideas differ about what kind of traditions the category of the vernacular is supposed to consist of, making it difficult to actually speak of a field of vernacular architecture studies. Because of the enormous diversity of building traditions classified under the umbrella of ‘the vernacular’ and the varied disciplinary and national backgrounds of those studying them, it may be said that two very different scholarly discourses (one, generally speaking, dealing with historical western traditions, and the other with contemporary non-western ones) exist, each with their own concepts, perspectives and interests. As Dell Upton (1993: 10) has noted, scholars taking part in these discourses ‘work to all intents and purposes ignorant of one another’. What is more, although both are interested in processes of change, their attitude towards the status of the vernacular in the future is different.
Without wanting to oversimplify too much, the discourse on western vernacular architecture can be said to be largely concerned with the documentation and understanding of the historical, rural and pre-industrial building heritage. Dominated by architectural historians, preservationists, folklorists and geographers, many of the publications on European or North American vernacular architecture focus on the classification and dating of individual buildings, or of specific forms, materials or plans, tracing distribution and diffusion patterns as well as changes in type within the context of social history. Though it is never expressed in so many words, an implicit assumption of this discourse is that there can be no real future for the vernacular, as the ongoing processes of modernization and globalization leave the pre-industrial building heritage of farmhouses, barns and mills that form the core of research ever more out of touch with the present. The reaction of many scholars who form part of this discourse has been to withdraw into the past, to look at the historic meaning, use and construction of buildings while ignoring the active re-use, re-interpretation or adaptation of the same or similar traditions in the present. As a result, studies of particular buildings, building types or time periods keep increasing in number and become ever more detailed, though arguably this goes at the expense of any real understanding of the processual nature of the vernacular traditions concerned.

The second discourse on vernacular architecture, which exists in parallel to the first one but with little academic overlap or communication, is more concerned with non-western traditions, although studies of western traditions are included as well. Studies that document particular vernacular building traditions within their cultural and historic context are also common in this discourse, but these are increasingly complemented by analyses of the ways in which the design, use and meaning of these traditions change within the context of contemporary processes of modernization and globalization. More theoretically oriented, paying attention to rural as well as urban traditions, these analyses look at the impacts of current trends like consumerism, the manufacturing of heritage, deterritorialization and ethnic revitalization on vernacular traditions, and discuss what the implications of such impacts are in terms of the negotiation of identity and the definition and value of key concepts like tradition, modernity and place. Instead of withdrawing into the past, many of these studies thus actively engage the present, increasingly arguing that vernacular traditions should be seen as processes that dynamically, and inter-dependently relate to identities, evolving and transforming over time. Nonetheless, as ongoing discussions on the ‘end of tradition’ and ‘post-traditional environments’ exemplify (e.g. AlSayyad 2004), it can be argued that, among many of those involved in this discourse, there is still an underlying concern for the future survival of the ‘true’ vernacular in an increasingly global world.

Largely focusing on the active part that vernacular traditions can play in the provision of appropriate and sustainable architecture for the future, the chapters in this book build on the work that has been done so far, particularly that in the discourse on the non-western vernacular. But they also intend to expand its scope by looking at issues that, until now, have not received much attention.
Lindsay Asquith and Marcel Vellinga

Though stimulating and sometimes challenging, many of the studies that have been carried out in recent years have focused on the impacts of the process of globalization on the constitution of local and regional identities, and the way in which these relate to design and the concepts of tradition and modernity. But, as noted above, apart from the effects of globalization on issues of cultural identity, the global community faces many other challenges at the beginning of the new millennium, including climate change, the depletion of resources, mass migrations, the impacts of natural disasters and ever-growing demands for housing. Though equally important issues in terms of the future role and sustainability of the vernacular, the way in which vernacular knowledge and experience may be used to respond to these challenges has so far, despite some notable exceptions (see Afshar and Norton 1997), not been the subject of much discussion (Oliver 2003: 14). This book, though by no means covering all the issues concerned, aims to stimulate some of this discussion.

The message of the book is a forward-looking and positive one. In contrast to the current stereotypes of a backward and old fashioned past, ‘disappearing worlds’, underdevelopment and poverty, all authors argue that in this time of rapid technological development, urbanization, mass consumption and the internationalization of power and wealth, there is still a lot that can be learned from the traditional knowledge, skills and expertise of the vernacular builders of the world. What is needed to make the active implementation of such vernacular know-how come true in a modern or development context, is an investment in research and education that explicitly stresses the dynamic nature of vernacular traditions. By critically investigating the achievements and shortcomings of vernacular traditions, and examining the ways in which that which is valuable in the vernacular may be integrated with that which is valuable in modern architectural practice, it will be possible to develop, through upgrading and adaptation, those aspects of contemporary built environments that are currently unsustainable or culturally inappropriate. Only when such a processual, critical and forward-looking perspective is adopted, will it be possible to dismantle the stereotypes that continue to cling to the vernacular and to say that there still is a place for vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century.

In the next section, we will shortly introduce the chapters in the book, which has been divided into three parts. The chapters in Part I deal with the importance of viewing the vernacular as a process. Those in Part II discuss the ways in which the vernacular may provide lessons for contemporary design. Finally, the chapters in Part III identify important areas for future research and education.

Part I: The vernacular as process
As has recently been summarized by AlSayyad (2004: 6–12), the concept of tradition has been a major theme in writings on vernacular architecture, most especially in the discourse on non-western traditions. A number of conferences have been devoted to its theme, and many important studies published (e.g. Bourdier and AlSayyad 1989; Abu-Lughod 1992; Upton 1993; AlSayyad 2004). In
line with ideas prevalent in the contemporary fields of anthropology, cultural geography, history and archaeology, these studies have increasingly stressed the dynamic and processual nature of tradition. Traditions can be seen as creative processes through which people, as active agents, interpret past knowledge and experiences to face the challenges and demands of the present. Arguably then, as Oliver (1989) has observed, it is this active process of the transmission, interpretation, negotiation and adaptation of vernacular knowledge, skills and experience that should form the focus of research and teaching, as much as the actual buildings that form their objectification.

The chapters in Part I reiterate and emphasize the importance of regarding tradition as a creative process, and indeed many contributors to the book, including Marchand, Lawrence, Vellinga and Howard Davis, identify the dynamics and transmission of vernacular traditions as a crucial focus for future research, practice and education. That tradition is changing and varied and should form a central point of attention in vernacular research is perhaps most explicitly discussed by Simon Bronner. Defining tradition as ‘a reference to the learning that generates cultural expressions and the authority that precedent holds’, Bronner provides a concise yet insightful treatise on the processual nature of tradition, focusing especially on the issues of creativity, innovation and authority that its study raises. Tradition, in Bronner’s view, is about expectation and social acceptance rather than, as is often noted, constraint. It is ‘as the local saying that gains credit by long and frequent use’. As a reference to precedent and a social construction, tradition invites commentary and interpretation and is often continuously re-negotiated, from generation to generation. As such it allows for creativity, and for adaptations and innovations that may ultimately, when they have been socially accepted, be integrated and become part of the tradition. ‘Creativity and tradition’, writes Bronner, ‘are intertwined, and represent the complex processes of humans expressing themselves to others in ways that carry value and meaning’.

Taking into account this dynamic balance of social custom and individual innovation leads to important questions of authority and control. When studying vernacular traditions, Bronner notes, one should not just ask why buildings look the way they do, why they came into being and how they changed along the way, but also by whose standards, by what precedents and with whose skills creation, transmission and change occur. Focusing on three case studies (Jewish sukkah, Amish barn-raisings and ‘recycled’ houses in Houston), he briefly discusses the dynamics of vernacular building traditions in a complex society such as twenty-first-century America and notes significant differences in how and why such traditions are transmitted and continued. In all three cases though, negotiation is inherent to the tradition, and change can be identified as a constant. Because they allow for creativity, innovation and change, Bronner notes, building traditions like the Jewish sukkah and Amish barn-raisings will continue to evolve and change, while new ones like the recycled houses will arguably keep emerging. Though such new ‘grassroots traditions’ may not be as established as the sukkah or Amish barn-raisings, Bronner notes that they may well represent the
future of the vernacular in industrialized societies, and shows how studying them may teach us much about what a tradition is, as well as, importantly, about what a tradition does.

A good ethnographic example of the way in which traditions are continuously re-negotiated through the process of transmission, as well as of how issues of authority and individual creativity play an important part in this dynamic process, is provided by Trevor Marchand. In his discussion of the apprenticeship system operated by vernacular masons in Djenne (Mali), Marchand shows how this age-old form of education simultaneously allows for the gestation and transmission of technical knowledge, as well as for the operation of a process of socialization that helps to forge the professional identity of aspiring masons. Working within an established system of authority, under the guidance of an established master mason, young apprentices are able to obtain the technical, ritual, economic and political skills needed to become a publicly recognized mason. At the same time, in taking part in the building process and observing the activities of the master mason they work with, they develop a sense of professional and social identity and, significantly, learn to negotiate the boundaries of the tradition. Again, as was also noted by Bronner, these boundaries are not rigid or static. Indeed, Marchand observes, creativity and innovative intervention are awarded and esteemed in Djenne, as it is those elements that ensure that the local built environment, combining tradition and innovation, remains meaningful.

The transmission of knowledge and the negotiation of identities and boundaries that takes place through the system of apprenticeship allow the masons of Djenne to sustain standards and enables them to continuously create a meaningful built environment. Such a built environment, Marchand notes, is inherently dynamic, ‘while remaining rooted in a dialogue with history and place’. Crucially, he argues, this dynamism needs to be taken into account when considering the sustainability of the building tradition. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the conservation of the distinctive style-Soudanaise architecture is a major concern in Djenne, involving many actors including architects, conservationists, government officials, funding bodies and anthropologists. Recalling the issue of authority discussed by Bronner, all these parties (and more) compete for control over the meaning of Djenne’s architectural heritage. Marchand argues nonetheless that it is crucial that the expert status of the masons is acknowledged and given centre stage in all this, as it is their knowledge and system of education that ultimately defines the tradition. Djenne’s building tradition, he writes, should be understood ‘as a set of meaning-making practices rather than a landscape of physical objects to be conserved for their unique forms or some inherent historic value’.

Another example of the way in which a vernacular tradition may change and adapt to new socio-political or environmental circumstances, but in the process will maintain certain features that are distinctive and specific, having arisen from a unique cultural, social and economic history, is provided by Anna Hoare. Discussing the settlements and dwellings of sedentarized Irish Travellers, Hoare criticises the academic discourse on nomadism, which in general has tended to regard mobility as an ecological adaptation. This view, she
notes, does not do justice to the cultural dynamics, flexibility and variety of nomadic groups throughout the world and ignores the fact that mobility may be motivated by a variety of cultural, social, economic and political factors, serving different purposes in different contexts. It undeservedly ‘suggests passivity on the part of people in their relations towards external environments and changing circumstances, to which they apparently merely react’. Besides, she writes, it leads to the prevalent notion that, at the beginning of a new millennium, nomadism has outlived its usefulness, and that the way of life and behaviour associated with it have become redundant and inappropriate.

Questioning this verdict, Hoare sets out to show that nomadic ‘social life and mobility are creative, affective factors in themselves rather than dependent corollaries of economic and ecological adaptation’, and that the vernacular skills, understandings and values of nomadic cultures are therefore likely to find new forms of social expression, and distinctive ways of living. Focusing on a number of Irish Traveller groups in the UK and Ireland, all of whom in the second half of the twentieth century have been forced to sedentarize, she shows how mobility is still a distinctive element of Traveller culture, despite the fact that the groups are now no longer ‘on the road’. Its social and political importance is evident, for instance, from the way in which it continues to inform the social composition of the settlements, to shape the constitution of relationships and identities, to influence the production and built forms of dwellings, and to frame the experience of a larger world. Despite the forced changes to the vernacular way of living and building, then, life among Irish Travellers continues to represent a distinctive cultural trajectory.

The argument that the vernacular should not be regarded as an architectural category consisting of static buildings that need to be carefully safeguarded, but as a concept which identifies dynamic building traditions that continuously evolve while remaining distinctive to a specific place, is central to Marcel Vellinga’s chapter. Noting that discussions of change in current discourses on vernacular architecture tend to emphasize processes of loss and decline, Vellinga calls for a critical reconsideration of the concept of the vernacular. Following Upton (1993) he argues that, in the pursuit of recognition for non-western and non-monumental buildings, the concept has unintendedly become reified. ‘A name’, he writes, ‘has become a thing’. Essentially, the vernacular has been defined in opposition to the modern. In so doing, Vellinga observes, the vernacular has effectively been relegated to the past, to a distinct ‘traditional’ period of time that somehow existed before the modern era, while at the same time it has been denied both a history and future. Because of its non-modern status, any changes introduced to the vernacular by the encounter with modernity are automatically seen to represent cultural decline and a loss of authenticity. ‘The vernacular and the modern, it seems, cannot go together.’

Still, Vellinga notes, many vernacular and modern traditions nowadays do merge, throughout the world, often in creative and unexpected ways. The building traditions that are the result of such amalgamations (such as, for instance, the ‘counter culture’ traditions discussed by Bronner, or modernized
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‘replicas’ of traditional buildings) are nonetheless largely ignored in the field of vernacular architecture studies because they are regarded as being not, or no longer, truly or ‘authentically’ vernacular. Yet to do so, Vellinga argues, is to deny the dynamic nature of building traditions and the application of meaning, and effectively restricts the development of the field of vernacular architecture studies. Calling instead for research that explicitly focuses on the way in which vernacular and modern traditions merge, he proposes widening the vernacular concept so that it includes all those buildings that are ‘distinctive cultural expressions of people who live in or feel attached to a particular place or locality’. Aware that such a conceptualization ultimately makes the category of the vernacular redundant, he argues that it would help those building traditions that are now called vernacular to get rid of the stigma of underdevelopment and a backward past, as such enabling them, as sources of architectural know-how, to assume an active part in the provision of sustainable architecture for the future.

Part II: Learning from the vernacular

Marchand and Vellinga’s assertion that vernacular traditions may have an important contribution to make to the development of sustainable future built environments is shared by most contributors to the book, and is elaborated upon in the chapters in Part II. As a form of what in more general terms has usually been referred to as ‘indigenous knowledge’ (Ellen, Parkes and Bicker 2000; Sillitoe, Bicker and Pottier 2002), much may still be learned from vernacular know-how, skills and experience. Of course this notion is not a fundamentally new one. As Afshar and Norton (1997) have summarized, there already exists a long-established, though still rather marginalized discourse that focuses on the ways in which vernacular traditions may be integrated into contemporary building practices in order to create more appropriate settlements and buildings. Now, at a time when concerns over sustainability and cultural identity continue to cast doubts over the processes of modernization and globalization, and alternative approaches to development are increasingly being looked for, it seems more timely and urgent than ever to build upon the achievements of this research.

A concise history of the discourse dealing with the incorporation of vernacular traditions in contemporary architectural practice is provided by Suha Özkan in his chapter on, what he calls, the ‘traditionalist’ approach to architecture. Reiterating briefly how the history of architecture may be written in terms of a succession of periods in which theoretical, professional and aesthetic principles are at first agreed upon and then challenged, he focuses in particular on the various reactions that sprung up in response to the dominance of Modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Apart from, among others, post-modernism and the ‘architecture of freedom’ movement, one of the most influential reactions, Özkan notes, has been that of ‘traditionalism’. This movement, which seeks to advance the integration of traditional skills and knowledge in contemporary building, has contributed to the emergence of the multi-disciplinary field of vernacular architecture studies which, he writes, has managed to ‘fill the biggest vacuum within architectural theory’ and has been increasingly, though slowly, recognized in
academia. Discussing briefly how this movement relates to some of the other responses to Modernism, Özkan proceeds to discuss the work of some of its proponents such as, notably, Hassan Fathy, Paul Oliver, the Development Workshop and CRATerre, all of whom have demonstrated how vernacular technologies, materials and forms may be applied in contemporary design.

Although Özkan rightly notes that some of the work carried out by these pioneers (including, famously, Fathy’s New Gourna project (Fathy 1973)) has been only partially successful, he also states that ‘in time, the followers of Hassan Fathy and Paul Oliver are destined to be successful’. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in a time of rapid ecological degradation, globalization and the destruction of much vernacular architectural heritage, concerns for the maintenance of local cultural identities and an awareness of the need to provide sustainable built environments are set to raise the interest in local vernacular traditions and their advantages in terms of cultural and environmental appropriateness. Importantly though, Özkan (echoing Marchand) notes that it is the cultural process of the transmission of traditions that needs to be looked at when we are considering the lessons that may be learned from the vernacular, rather than just the buildings or, what he calls, the ‘physical shells’ of those traditions.

This latter assertion, which entails that it is the appreciation and sustenance of vernacular knowledge, skills and experience that needs to be the focus of attention rather than the static preservation of actual buildings, also forms one of the central tenets of Roderick Lawrence’s chapter. Discussing the way in which principles deduced from the vernacular may provide lessons to those involved in the contemporary provision of sustainable human settlements, Lawrence takes as an important starting point that ‘it is unrealistic to consider an optimal sustainable state or condition of vernacular buildings, or any larger human settlement’. Because the vernacular, like all human constructs, results from the active and dialectic interrelation between ecological and cultural factors, and seeing that these factors are de facto dynamic because of the continuous mutual influencing that creates ever changing conditions, vernacular architecture and settlements by definition have to adapt in order to be sustainable. Therefore, Lawrence argues, sustaining human settlements involves an understanding of the mechanisms and principles involved in these adaptive processes. Since the relationship between the natural and human environments is mediated through knowledge, values, ideas and information, it is those aspects of a tradition, constituting ‘a large warehouse of natural and cultural heritage’, that can provide lessons for future generations.

After a concise but useful discussion of the main, though sometimes conflicting interpretations of what ‘sustainability’ is and a brief explanation of the premises of a human ecology perspective on vernacular architecture, Lawrence suggests a number of basic principles that may be applied in professional practice to increase the sustainability of future buildings and settlements. Using the vernacular architecture of the Valais (Wallis) valley in Switzerland as a case study to validate these principles, he stresses, among others, the need to consider ecological and cultural diversity, the importance of interrelations between different