Vernacular Architecture

Buildings, like poems and rituals, realize culture. Their designers rationalize their actions differently. Some say they design and build as they do because it is the ancient way of their people and place. Others claim that their practice correctly manifests the universally valid laws of science. But all of them create out of the smallness of their own experience.

All architects are born into architectural environments that condition their notions of beauty and bodily comfort and social propriety. Before they have been burdened with knowledge about architecture, their eyes have seen, their fingers have touched, their minds have inquired into the wholeness of their scenes. They have begun collecting scraps of experience without regard to the segregation of facts by logical class. Released from the hug of pleasure and nurture, they have toddled into space, learning to dwell, to feel at home. Those first acts of occupation deposit a core of connection in the memory.

Were it me, were I the one who would come to build, there would be red clay and pale curls of wood. There would be an orchard outside and shotguns in the hallway. Thick white paint on rough pine boards would connote home and call to mind the soft sounds of dogs and old men on the porch, the cool feel of linoleum on the kitchen floor, the smells of bacon frying. A woman’s lilt, an endless melody strung of hymns to Jesus, would wander through it, accompanied by the brisk whisks of a broom.

As we grow, memory runs wild, undirected by future projects. Culture accumulates into an inner resource of association and gathers order aesthetically. This feels good, that bad, while ex-
vernascular architecture

experience widens, memories deepen, and culture complicates through learning.

When the builder's attention is narrowed by training, whether in the dusty shop of a master carpenter or the sleek classroom of a university, past experience is not obliterated. It endures in the strange caves of the brain and in the old habits of the muscles as they seek smooth routes through the air. Education adds a layer. In precept and admonition, in pedagogical technique, if not in content, the teacher brings cultural values into the process of transmission. Students obey or rebel. Inwardly, new ideas mix and coexist with old ones, and the mind, fed by the senses, continues to bounce about, unfettered by consistency. Resolution will come in performance, in dedicated, situated instants of concentration, while planning meets accidents and learning continues.

Despite the rigors of training, the architect remains a full person, at once competent and confused. The building shares in its builder's confusions. It seems right, as a result, because it incorporates the experience that the architect shares — not completely, of course, but completely enough — with those who do not build, but who look at buildings and go into them. The building works because it integrates the tight routines of professional practice with the loose expanse of cultural association. The overtly architectural contrivance covertly absorbs the norms of beauty and social exchange and political order with which the architect, as a member of society, has come to feel at ease.

Architecture is like any realization of potential, like any projection of thought. The things of the world — this sentence, that palace — preceded themselves in the mind as plans. Plans blend memories with a reading of the immediate situation. They are realized in things. They can be reversed in analysis. Things become plans, plans disaggregate into sets of decisions, decisions become intentions. All creations bespeak their creators. They stand before us as images of will and wit. In this, architecture is like other things, and there are no differences among kinds of building. All are cultural creations, orderings of experience, like poems and rituals.

Agzikarahan, Turkey. 1982

Vale, Guernsey, Channel Islands. 1982
If every building is a cultural fact, the consequence of a collision between intentions and conditions, if differences of culture and circumstance adequately account for differences among buildings, the question is why we persist in calling some of them vernacular. There are answers.

Few kinds of building have been accorded full study. When we isolate from the world a neglected architectural variety and name it vernacular, we have prepared it for analysis. The term marks the transition from the unknown to the known. The study of vernacular architecture is a way that we expand the record, bit by bit. At work, moving toward a complete view of the builder’s art, we bring buildings into scrutiny and toward utility in the comprehensive study of humankind.

Buildings are neglected for different reasons. Some are the exotic products of indigenous people in places unknown to us. But others are familiar, maybe too familiar. The architectural historian who lavishes attention yet again on some canonical monument probably lives in a house of a kind that has wholly eluded serious study. Pondering why some buildings get studied and others do not, we are likely to argue that some buildings are important and others are not. Then pondering the emptiness of that answer, we find that important buildings can be interpreted as displays of the values we value — grandeur, perhaps, or originality — while unimportant buildings display values that we have not yet learned to appreciate. Neglect is a sign of ignorance. The term, I repeat, marks the transition from the unknown to the known: we call buildings “vernacular” because they embody values alien to those cherished in the academy. When we called buildings “folk,” the implication was that they countered in commonness and tradition the pretense and progress that dominate simple academic schemes. Folk buildings contained a different virtue. The study of vernacular architecture, through its urge toward the comprehensive, accommodates cultural diversity. It welcomes the neglected into study in order to acknowledge the reality of difference and conflict.

Should we wonder why architectural study has aped the study of art in its erection of a canon of important buildings, we will find, on reflection, a host of causes. One of them has to do with the ease of procedure. Selecting a few buildings, a few architects, and then linking them up chronologically, we can borrow the facile techniques of the historian of great men and events. But taking the comprehensive view and recognizing diversity, the study of vernacular architecture drives toward better historical procedures, ones that focus existentially on action and lead to the construction of a multiplex idea of time. We call buildings vernacular to highlight the cultural and contingent nature of all building.

Proposing distinctions and labeling buildings along the way, the study of vernacular architecture is an approach to the whole of the built world. It favors completeness, recognizes diversity, and seeks ways to use buildings as evidence in order to tell better versions of the human story. In the future, it will be obsolete, but now the term “vernacular” is one of the tools we use when we face architectural objects with a wish to crack them open and learn their meanings.

Materialization

Architecture works in space as history works in time. History interrupts time’s ceaseless flow, segmenting and reordering it on behalf of the human need for meaning. Architecture intrudes in the limitless expanse of space, dividing it into useful, comprehensible pieces. Converting space into places through disruption, architecture brings meaning to the spatial dimension.

With astronomy as the extreme instance, the architectural impulse begins in exploration and naming. The baby crawls upon a softness that matures in meaning as time passes and names pile up: the softness is a rug, it is a red rug, it is a mediocre late nineteenth-century eagle Kazak. The explorer ventures into unknown territory to parcel and claim it with names that commemorate his heroism. Through time, names accumulate on the land
and combine to recall its history: the sequence of settlement, the conflict between the invader and the native.

The name is a fleeting means for bringing history into space and marking the land as meaningful. Marking becomes firmer with physical alteration, when a trail is blazed through a forest, or one stone is piled on another to set a limit. More stones confirm the limit and rise into walls: the wall the Chinese built that turned the mounted warriors westward toward Europe, the wall the Romans struck across Britain to cede the heathy highlands to the wild men of the north, the walls of forts along the borders, the walls of prisons and gated communities, the walls of the cottage where the bold thresherman, his day’s work done, dandles the baby on his knee.

With the act of physical alteration that calls time into space, implying a past and a future, and with the walls that divide space, at once including and excluding, architecture has happened.

Architecture gives physical form to claims and names, to memories and hopes. As a conceptual activity, architecture is a matter of forming ideas into plans, plans into things that other people can see. Architecture shapes relations between people. It is a kind of communication. The mode of its thinking connects architecture to all of culture, but its mode of realization distinguishes it from other varieties of communication. To be architecture, it must be realized in materials.

The decision to create a building is the decision to destroy some part of the material universe. Things are wrecked — trees are toppled, stone is broken, old houses are razed — to make life better. The desire is for improvement. The process of the desire is technological.

Technology is a corollary of human existence. It is the means of our extension into space, as natural to people as swimming is to fish. As life unfolds, every technological act brings changes in two great relations: the one that always connects the human and nonhuman spheres, the other that is built to connect people with one another.
Architectural Technology

The relation of the human and nonhuman begins its transformation in the first step of technology, the selection of materials. A distinction between local and imported materials was among the first criteria that writers, in England particularly, used to define vernacular architecture. Vernacular buildings are composed of local materials, they argued. During travel, they enjoyed watching the substrate of the earth rise and form into buildings, crossing the land in bands of sandstone, limestone, and granite, and they deplored the rash of red brick buildings that spread along the railways, oblivious to geological differences. Their taste was built on conventional dichotomies: natural and artificial, native and alien, old and new, local and national, handmade and industrial. The contemporary cynic would find their view easy to deconstruct as elitist and dismiss as sentimental. But they were on to something.

During architectural fieldwork, I have taught myself to concentrate on form, but everywhere I go the people whose houses I study classify buildings by materials, and especially by roofing. I found in Turkey that the local historians separated old houses with flat roofs from new houses with pitched roofs covered by purchased materials. In Bangladesh, village people, thinking less about history than social class, divide buildings by the materials of their walls — stuccoed brick versus puddled mud or bamboo lashed in tension — and by their roofs of thatch or tin. In Africa and Latin America, thatch is comparably yielding to tin, and in the rural United States one age gave way to another when wooden shingles were replaced by shiny sheets of metal.

I learned the lesson of this change first in Ireland. In Ballymenone, a farming community where I drew a plan of every house and classified them into four distinct types, the people classified them into two groups by materials, separating houses that were thatched from those that were roofed with slate or metal.
Joe Murphy, Johnny Drumm, and Tommy Love, masters of thatching, taught me the logic that lay beneath their distinction. Thatch makes good insulation. It is warm in the winter, cool in the summer. Environmentally efficient, thatch is also beautiful. Looking downhill at a house he had recently roofed, Tommy Love said, "When it is new with straw, it shines like gold. The sun glints off it, and it is lovely. It is lovely, right enough."

Efficient and beautiful, thatching is also economical. Its main demand is time, and in Ballymenone they say that the man who made time made plenty. Thatch also requires a knowledge of growing things, the understanding of seeds and soil and weather that farmers develop during time passed in place. The material grows from the ground. It is an endlessly renewable resource, and it is processed and applied by hand, with no need for expensive machinery. Thatching takes knowledge and skill, it is a job for the man called handy, but it is a technology that requires no money.

The problem is that thatch demands regular maintenance and frequent replacement. The metal roof obviates the need for constant intervention; it is effectively permanent. The householder is not obliged to be a craftsman or to be connected — as they were in Ballymenone through trades of aid — with neighbors who are skilled. He manages alone without effort or knowledge or talent or social connection. But metal does not suit the climate. It works little better in cool, humid Ireland than it does in hot, humid Bangladesh, where the tin roof roasts you in summer. And metal is not beautiful. Ellen Cutler said it broke her heart when she used the royalties she received from my first book on Ballymenone to strip the thatch from her home and roof it with metal. Her house, she said, had turned ugly. But she made the change because of "the times that are in it."

Those times, in Ellen Cutler's mind, were characterized by the melting away of intimate social orders in the heat of Ulster's political troubles, and they were marked by shifts in fashion. Mrs.
Cutler belonged to a small rural community where it was satisfying to live in the largest, loveliest thatched house. Dick, her son, lived in the same place, but he belonged to a vast rural proletariat. He worked for wages paid by an agricultural entrepreneur. She knew he would never move into a thatched house — so old and cranky, so very Irish — so she ruined its looks, turning it ugly to make it suit him. She was successful. When Mrs. Cutler died in 1981, Dick moved his family up the hill, and, as she had hoped, Cutler blood kept flowing on Cutler land. Her change brought continuity.

The metal roof fits the times. The times demand money. Manufactured in a mill beyond the horizon, moved by rail and road, sheet metal roofing obliges people to collect specimens of their national currency. They are drawn into paying jobs, becoming the little wheels in the big machine that gathers wealth for distant capitalists. Out of the house for most of the day and beat at its end, people have no time to build through cordial conversations the friendships that once brought a thatcher to the house in exchange for agricultural produce.

The connections shaped by thatching — between people and nature, between people and people — were direct and intensely local. The change from thatch to tin signals the surrender of local autonomy. In Ireland, as in Bangladesh, people have chosen to adjust to the times. They have chosen permanence, reliance on distant producers, and participation in the international cash economy.

Not from the perspective of a privileged observer, whether cynical or sentimental, but from the perspective of the people who live the life, we can sum things up. In the shift from local to imported materials, there is a loss in environmental efficiency and a loss in beauty. There is a gain in permanence, which is compensation for a loss of skill and social connection. The loss of the pleasure taken from a job well done, and the burden of the need for cash, must be set against the prestige that is supposed to accrue to the one who purchases expensive objects. Become a consumer, one reorients. Breaking away from the neighbors with their delicate sense of local hierarchy, people come into comparison with others who, they say in Ballymenone, have money like hay. What is lost is security. What is gained is the hope that commodities will somehow balance the account.

The meanings that lie in the selection of materials are social and economic as well as environmental. But the environment sets the stakes. Living wisely in a tight place, people learn the environment. They know how to select from it the right materials for the job. The prime virtue in materials is their ability to alter the climate, shaping a little environment within which architecture can be forgotten and life can go on. It is a matter on which cultures differ, but when people seek separation from nature, which all of them do in bad weather, their actions often glide out of the pragmatic and into the aesthetic.

One of the first to write on Irish vernacular architecture, the Swedish ethologist Åke Campbell, spoke glowingly of the fit of the thatched Irish house to the green Irish land. The house, he said, belonged like a natural feature, blending in like a rock or a tree. To Campbell, to me, and — this is what actually matters — to the people who labor to make the houses look like they do, Irish houses are things of beauty on the landscape. But the goal of their builders is not to have them melt into nature. In brilliant white, the house cracks out of its setting of green and brown and gray. Ellen Cutler told me how they picked the lumps from the bottom of the limekiln and burst them in boiling water to get the whitest, brightest whitewash. A widow in her seventies, Mrs. Cutler whitewashed the walls regularly to hide the natural tones of the stones and to make her house stand proud in the environment. The weather is wet. The lanes are muddy and rutted. Dampness absorbs light into darkness. In Ballymenone, they
describe the world around them as rough and dull. Smooth and bright, its white walls sparkling, the sun glinting off its roof, the house is a victory over conditions.

It is reasonable for the observer in retreat from the artificiality of industrial environments to see something natural in vernacular architecture. It is equally reasonable for people in daily contention with nature to seek its conquest through processes that smooth the rough and brighten the dull, altering the natural into the artificial. Local materials are their resources, their technologies are powered by their own muscles, but their aim is to create emblems of cultural presence. The bright white house claims the land and names it human.

If vernacular technologies involve local materials and the touch of the hand, their contrast is with industrial systems of production. Vernacular technology depends on direct connections: direct access to materials and direct connections among suppliers, producers, and consumers who simultaneously shape landscapes, social orders, and economic arrangements, while wealth circulates in the vicinity. Industrial production employs imported materials and complex machinery. It depends on expansive political powers that maintain the costly infrastructure of transportation and communication, while supporting through law the right of a small minority to amass great reserves of capital.

The distinction is real and important to preserve, for it helps us assure complexity in historical study. While the globe abounds with instances of the shift to industrial production, technologies based on local skills and materials continue, and they are dominant in many of the world’s regions. It is important not to lose the distinction in our thinking. And it is important not to exaggerate its clarity. Vernacular and industrial technologies differ in resources and social organization, but they do not necessarily differ in the attitude toward nature.
VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Industrial production erases nature. In sheets of metal and slick plastic surfaces, there is no memory of natural origins. People must get up and go outside to remember.

Vacationing folks escape to the woods to forget the city, to relax, to get burned by the sun, bitten by bugs, perhaps to find something like a god in nature. Rolling up logs to build a fancy camp, the city sport leaves them round and brown. They still resemble trees, each distinct in the wall and knobby with knots, and he lets them weather to silver to fit his notion of the natural. A part of nature, his vacation home also alludes to history, to the log cabin that stands firmly in the American consciousness as a mythic sign of the time of the beginning. But the log cabin's builder went into the woods to establish civilization.

The wilderness howled around him, sublime and vast and threatening. He chopped into it bravely, felling trees, hewing their faces flat, lifting them into plumb alignment, and trimming their ends flush at the corner. Chinking the gaps between the logs with shingles or rocks, packed with clay and coated with fine lime plaster, he combined natural substances into smooth, true walls. The trees of the forest were attacked, hacked, split, and made to submit to the plan in his head. They were dropped and raised. They were wrench from the vertical to the horizontal. They were flattened to realize his design in a unified agony of straight lines that sharply marked his disjunction from nature. And then he confirmed his move to artificiality with a consolidating coat of whitewash or a cladding of clapboards. Restorationists tend to strip away these outer layers, leaving the house naked, vulnerable to rot, and creating an image of rusticity to reinforce preconceptions about progress. But the builder intended them from the beginning. Whitewash and clapboarding called up memories of order, of houses in the cities back east, of homes across the water on the tamed landscapes of Ireland and England, and they expressed his hope for improvement. He built to make the world better, to secure a place of control and reason within the mad-

Dovetailed corner-timbering of a log house built on the frontier. Shenandoah County, Virginia. 1969
ness of the wilderness. A man of culture, he built a farmhouse that stood out of the woods in splendid artifice.

Long before the industrial revolution, technologies had elaborated in the West. The towering oak was brought down and dressed into a timber, straight and square. Then the timber was joined into a frame. If wood was to be the cover, trees were sawed and split into slices, regular in size and shape, that were applied in series to make floors and walls and roofs. Or, clay was dug, soured in a pit, and molded into geometric units that were hardened by fire. Then these interchangeable parts were laid by line into walls. Traditional technologies of framing and masonry included a decisive step — the squared timber, the squared brick — in the process by which nature was erased and the human world was created. The timber embedded in the frame or the brick lost in the wall are not reminders of nature but pieces of plans and proofs of human control.

When the materials were still local and the techniques still manual, the straight timber replaced the bent one and the brick replaced the stone. In its products, industrial technology is less a violation of the vernacular than it is an exaggeration of one desire within the Western vernacular: its intention to set the human being in a role of righteous command.

There is a difference, though, between vernacular technology and its exaggeration by industry. When nature loomed tremendous and people fought back with plows and axes, their actions were heroic. When people sit in temperature-controlled offices and decree the continuation of that ancient struggle, their actions seem heartless. But the fact of continuity remains. It is traditional — folk, vernacular, cultural — for Western designers to treat nature as a resource, a convenient means for realizing the plans that are contrived in the freedom of the head. This attitude is exhibited most clearly in the aesthetic of the artificial, the traditional taste for repetitive, identical units (the bricks of the chimney, the windows of the high-rise apartment building) and for smooth, unified surfaces (the adzed timber and planed plank, the tile of the bathroom and the formica of the kitchen).

Aesthetic continuity eases change. The faces of the thatched roof and the metal roof are smooth and bright when new, both slick as a shaved chin. Plywood and sheetrock, asphalt, aluminum, and vinyl have been welcomed to the American country home as perfections of the old wish for artificiality. Clean, repetitive concrete blocks have been gracefully incorporated into rural building practice on both sides of the Atlantic, replacing clean, repetitive bricks and boards. Folded in an Appalachian cove, the manufactured mobile home stands out of the landscape, a compact, sharp unit, in the manner of its handmade predecessor, the log cabin.

But, despite tradition, experience has been disrupted. Nature conquered nonchalantly at a distance is not like nature conquered face on. The hewn timber and the steel beam both display the aesthetic of artificiality, but the tree I topple and hew to smoothness is my victory. I have known the transformation of nature in my own hands. I am powerful. The steel beam mined and milled by another and buried somewhere in the concrete beneath me is so removed from my experience that it seems to hold no message for my mind. But if I stop to think about it, the message is clear. I am powerless, utterly dependent on a system scaled beyond my control or understanding.

In the struggle for freedom, striving to fulfill our humanity through release from delimiting conditions, we have wriggled out of one trap, only to be caught in another. In pushing against the natural environment, fighting for control and nearly winning, we have deployed weapons — increasingly intricate, expensive, and mysterious machines — that have demanded our surrender to the political and economic forces of a cultural environment. We understand the mechanics of our cultural environment no better than our ancestors understood the mechanics of their natural environment. We have entered a new age of magic and fear.
Technology is more than a handy means for materializing designs. Since technology requires disruptive intervention in the universe, it asks for answers to profound questions. One class of question is cosmological. Whether they are articulated in religious or scientific terms, cosmological answers enunciate first principles, locating people in the world and conditioning their right to create through destruction. In one cosmological formulation, people occupy an enchanted realm. The trees and rocks and the very earth are alive with active force. Performing in a world filled with hungry ghosts and wily demons, people combine prayers and charms with skills and procedures into a technology of appeasement. Their products display respect and awe. In another cosmological tradition, the deities have granted command to humankind, or the people have seized it through cunning or courage. Theirs is a technology of mastery. It yields, by increasing division, products that display the clear separation of culture from nature, and that, like as not, contribute to the proliferation of ecological calamities.

Technology demands answers to cosmological questions and to political questions. While they disfigure nature, people configure orders among themselves, organizing a force for work and structuring relations between those who make alterations in the physical environment and those who benefit from them. Doubly cultural, technology unfolds from theories about the human position in the universe and from theories that govern the distribution of power among people.

***Social Orders***

Technology’s political questions do not come into focus in the situation described as ideal by writers on vernacular architecture. In the ideal, design, construction, and use — domains of potential conflict — unify in a single man who gathers materials from his own land to build for himself the building he wants. Such things happen.

In 1938, Richard Hutto built a barn near Oakman, Alabama. He cut the trees on his own farm, dragged them to the site with a mule, and he raised them, alone, into a building. Its form is what scholars call a double-crib barn, and they can trace the plan from Alabama along the mountains to Pennsylvania, and from Pennsylvania to Central Europe. Mr. Hutto took the form from the memories he developed out of life in his locale. He trimmed the trees, cut them to length, and he notched their ends to interlock at the corner in a variety of timbering that the geographer Fred Kniffen named V-notching. Mr. Hutto called it "roof-topping."

Richard Hutto's barn was all his. It had only him to blame, it seems. But, when we talked in 1964, he attributed its failings to the times in which he worked. He told me he was thinking of tearing it down. It did not satisfy him because he had been forced to build it alone. He did not have the help of a black laborer as Pete Everett did when he built a barn, similar in form and construction, near Pine Hill, Mississippi, one year earlier. Mr. Hutto did it alone, but in the better days of the farther past, he said, a team of neighbors would have gathered to help. With more energy available, the timbers would have been hewn, rather than left in the round. Poles, he called them, not logs. The team would have included experts with the proper tools. The ends of the logs would have been trimmed cleanly with a saw, instead of raggedly with a chopping axe.

Many craftsmen have spoken similarly to me. Enacting the vernacular ideal, they think of themselves as enduring amid decline. When I met Stan Lamprey, a basketmaker in Braunton, a village in Devonshire, England, he was working alone like many American craftsmen, cutting the willows, weaving them into tight baskets, and then selling them to women who used them in shopping and gathering eggs. Stan Lamprey kept making baskets because it was his trade, the source of his pleasure and cash, but he remembered better days, when he worked in Braunton's basket factory. Then the boys did the simple tasks of gathering and preparing the materials, the manager of the factory did the nox-
ious job of commerce, and Stan worked in a sociable place, chatting with his mates, and doing the difficult part of the work that brought him his joy.

When the materials were still local, the skills still manual, the norm in architecture, as in pottery or metalworking or weaving, was not for one person to do everything, from the extraction of materials, through their preparation, to their assembly into usable forms. Work was divided by specialization. Different people filled different roles in a single process, as actors do in a drama, and technology entailed social arrangements.

After more than a decade of rambling fieldwork, during which I came to some understanding of the log buildings of the Appalachian domain, I determined to do it right. With a modest grant, I assembled a team of students — all of them, Howard Marshall, Steve Ohm, and John Vlach, have gone on to success — and I led them in a survey of the old log buildings of Greene County in southwestern Pennsylvania. It was my best experience as an educator. We learned together in the field.

At work in Greene County, we did not, of course, come to conclusions that would support the idea, so fundamental to the capitalistic mythos, that the frontier was a place of equal opportunity. We found brick mansions as old as the log cabins. In the beginning, there were differences of wealth. The log cabin was more a sign of social class than of rugged individualism. Log buildings did not look like they were made by self-reliant souls who went into the woods with an axe, there to succeed or fail by dint of individual intelligence and industry. Highly consistent in form and technology, the buildings implied a prevalence of collective, rather than individual effort. We did not find competitive individualism at the dawn of American time, but neither did we find the perfect unity of a cultural spirit guiding the hands of the dead. What struck us was how many of the eighty-three buildings we studied could be clustered into small groups, each marked by certain conventions of practice, each signed by a particular master at work within a technological tradition.
VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

John James had not yet published his study of Chartres Cathedral, one of the best of all books on material culture. Examining the great building through exacting measurements, James was able to attribute it, not to a single architect, but to a succession of master masons. Their names are lost, but their peculiarities of technical habit abide in the fabric. Similarly, in details that would become invisible once the building was finished, we discovered builders who had knacks and tricks, particular to them alone. They knew special ways to join sills and frame windows. James named his nameless masons for colors. We named the house carpenters of the frontier after the techniques they used to frame the plate at the top of the wall that received the thrust of the rafters.

In silent wood, the buildings remembered the developed skills of architectural specialists, and, as Warren Roberts has demonstrated, they used a big chest of tools to get the job done. The tools were too many for one man to carry into the wilderness on his back. The builders on the frontier had chopping axes to score the logs, broadaxes to hew them, and saws to make clear cuts. They had augers in different sizes for boring, wedges and froes for splitting, and they had a battery of planes to smooth the boards and edge them with decorative moldings.

A fine, trim house, the log cabin displayed professional practice in its finish and in its most difficult joints. But the rest of the building fluttered with the uncertain touch of the amateur. Though plates and doors were framed consistently and accurately, logs were hewn differently, corner-timbering varied, and there were mistakes in the notches cut to receive the joists. The building — whether a house of one room or an enormous, soaring barn — spoke clearly of a collaboration between a master of the trade and a gathering of willing amateurs.

The collaboration we puzzle out of common old buildings or rare old contracts is easy to understand when we come to places where architecture is not yet dominated by industrial capitalism. Let us shift from architectural speculation to ethnographic certainty, returning to the white houses on the soft green hills of Northern Ireland.

When Paddy McBrien wanted a new home, he went to his neighbor, the mason Tommy Moore, and asked him to build a house on the track of Eamon Corrigan's. Track is the word they use in Ballymenone for plan. The shape of the building is like the track of a cow in the mud that hardens in the sun, leaving an exact sign of her passing. Paddy did not begin with principles, but, like most architects, with historical precedents. Tommy, a professional, the builder of many houses, suggested one change, an additional door to ease the flow of internal traffic. Paddy accepted Tommy's advice, and made another change. Though it would cost him more, he did not want his kitchen to rise inside to the rafters, where soot and cobwebs collect, for that, the old local norm, would make "a rum looking shop." He wanted a neat, flat ceiling, easy to clean, above his kitchen.

Mary McBrien, Paddy's wife, also wanted her kitchen clean. She approved of the ceiling and requested a hallway, a space to divide the inside from the outside, where muddy wellingtons could be left. In the community's old houses, the door — "the hole the mason left" — broke directly into the kitchen, and it was left open to welcome visitors, winds, chickens, and filth. Mary McBrien wanted a separation that would, like Paddy's ceiling, make her kitchen a tidy box. Later, Paddy and Mary would agree that they had made an error. Mary felt her work in the kitchen was lonesome when she could no longer glance out the window and the open front door toward the action along the road. The hallway proved to be a bad thing when wakes were held in the kitchen. You had to upend the coffin and walk it along the twisted route from the kitchen, through the hallway, and out the front door. The body bumping inside the box was not, Paddy said, a sound you liked to hear. But when they built, Paddy and Mary McBrien wanted a modern house, which they designed in their minds by making alterations to an old house that stood in view, across the road and uphill from their own.
VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Paddy chose the site. It was not on a hilltop, where the old houses stood, but near the road, convenient for vehicles. Tommy and Paddy went to the site and stood in the center of the house, the spot where the hearth would be. They imagined walls around them, then staked them out. It was Paddy's job, then, to cut down trees that grew on his land along the river, to get them home, and square them to become the purlins that would carry the roof across the masonry partitions. His grandfather would have gathered stones. His father would have dug clay and shaped bricks. Paddy made a pile of molded concrete blocks, then Tommy Moore came, and with help from hired laborers and from Paddy himself, he laid the block. The team built the walls, leaving gaps where Tommy marked them. He stood away and located the openings by eye. They look symmetrical in placement, but the measurements I took reveal them to be only roughly so. To finish the job, Tommy subcontracted a carpenter to frame the windows and doors, and to make the furniture, the tables and chairs and dresser of the kitchen.

There Paddy sits, resting with a cup of tea after hard work in the fields. A fire of turf burns on the hearth. The Sacred Heart glows by the door. The house above him is solid proof of his ability to accomplish his dreams. Many minds and many hands conspired, but he was part of the process of design and construction, and now he is free to use the building as he wants. He understands the object he lives in completely, and it teaches him convincingly about the extent and limits of his power in the world. There are things he can do, things he cannot do, but from collaborative creation, he understands about both.

During architectural action, abilities are separated and combined in many ways. When the people of Karagölme, a village in western Turkey, had collected enough cash from the sale of their carpets to build a new mosque, they hired a master. He was not a member of the community. He came, did his job, got his pay, and left. The master planned the building on the ground, orienting it correctly toward Mecca, and he did the woodwork, framing the window, the
door, and the roof, and making the stepped minber inside where the hoca delivers the sermon on Fridays. My friend Mehmet Öztürk and his neighbors took time away from farming; they gathered and raised the masonry walls. The money won from international commerce, from the sale of their beautiful new carpets, was used to tighten the communal bonds of those who work together at the loom and in the fields, who build together, and who worship together in their own bright white mosque.

Prospering, as an energetic merchant can on the perversive, dangerous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Attallah decided to make a gift to his community, a village on the outskirts of Peshawar. A new mosque would bring him prestige, while affirming his intention to belong to the community that differences in riches can disturb so easily.

Attallah hired a young master named Fazul. They drew up no plan. A need for plans seems natural to the architectural historian, but we should not be surprised when we find none. Plans drawn on paper are indications of cultural distance. The amount of detail on a plan is an exact measure of the differences that separate those who conjoin in a building project. The more minimal the plan, the more completely the architectural idea abides in the separate minds of the client and the architect. For Attallah and Fazul, a few words were enough. They both knew what mosques looked like. All Fazul needed to know was the size of the budget. Then he staked out the plan. His laborers dug up the soil, shaped it into adobe bricks, and the building went up. Attallah, pleased with the result, proud of his generosity, joins his neighbors for prayer in the cool interior of the new village mosque.

It is like that on the other side of the Indian subcontinent, when the executive committee of a Hindu temple comes to the sculptor Haripada Pal in Dhaka city. There are no plans and few words. They name a deity. They state a sum. The rest is entirely up to Haripada. He prays and crafts the clay image that is installed in the temple. There he and his patrons join with all the
members of the Hindu community to receive through prayer the blessings of God. In communal action, personal differences are not suppressed. They are exploited for the common good. The patron’s ability to pay connects with the artist’s ability to create, and everyone in the community benefits as differences intermesh in a new unity.

In describing buildings as the creations of their occupants, writers on vernacular architecture choose a simple and concrete way to speak of unity. Design, construction, and use come to oneness in a single mind. In one mind, there is room aplenty for conflict, and the possibilities for conflict proliferate when the designer, the builder, and the user are different people. And when they are, social organization is necessary, and social organizations are apt to shape in conformity with the political orders prevalent in society.

Division in labor is normal in complex architectural technologies. Real complications bring differences among the workers and between the producers who can make things and the consumers who cannot make things. But difference coincides easily with unity when designers, builders, and users connect in culture. The idea of cultural unity is the point behind the scholarly creation of the ideal of the builder-occupant. What makes vernacular architecture is not an occupant who builds but a cultural congruity among design, construction, and use.

When different people share in culture, in basic assumptions about what is right and what is wrong, about what a building should be, when they are of like mind about things, their social arrangements can be built on a political order that is simultaneously hierarchical and collaborative. During interaction, people are assigned roles — in one moment obliged to follow, in another obliged to lead. While the walls of his house are rising, Paddy McBrien is one of the crew, a follower. But when the storm clouds gather and the hay lies on the spread, Paddy, renowned as an agricultural expert, steps into the lead. His neighbors submit to his direction and form a single force. In the fields, Paddy’s neigh-

bor Peter Flanagan, an impoverished farm laborer, is one of the hands. At night, courtly Peter Flanagan opens his fiddle case and takes command. Successful farmers and professional masons assemble into a respectful audience for his performance. On the basis of neighborly reciprocity and cooperation, they build unity out of difference.

In the beginning, there was difference. Again we can say that the industrial process is a hyperbolic extension of one feature in the old tradition, in this case its rational division of labor for efficiency in production. Again we can say that, despite continuity, there is a disruption in experience. Cultural unity — congruence in design, construction, and use — does not depend on connections made face to face. The objects of material culture are suited to long-range communication. Carried by trade over great stretches of space, now as always, artifacts can inspire cultural connections between people at a distance. An industrial product, designed by one person and manufactured by many laborers in a big building, can perfectly satisfy the desire of an unknown consumer. It is possible. The designer and consumer might be one in culture. But when hierarchical arrangements expand, unchecked by direct collaborative interaction, then they can harden into a politics of dominance and submission.

Then designers, divorced from consumers, plan houses that they would be unwilling to occupy themselves, and that do not fit the needs of their users. We have the disaster of public housing projects. Then managers, lacking intimate knowledge of the work that must be done, demand the impossible and arrange procedures in strict bureaucratic fashion, leaving little room for the workers to uphold their own standards, or find satisfaction in their daily labor by bringing projects to completion. We have workers who trade their lives for wages, waiting for the unfulfillment of weekends and vacations. Then consumers are reduced to choosing from a set of things, no one of which meets their needs. We have consumers with no option but to purchase commodities that bring them no real joy. As direct social connections
disassemble, hierarchical political orders solidify, and malaise shapes into apathy, vague rage, and small fears in search of causes.

With industrial production, a traditional wish for separation from nature, and a traditional pattern of division in work, both extend from order to alienation. In relations between the human and nonhuman spheres, alienation brings bodily comfort. Separated clearly from nature, freed from environmental constraints, cooled when it is hot, heated when it is cold, people feel comfortable. In the relations among people, alienation hastens the pursuit of wealth. Unlimited by obligations owed to other people, no longer locked into a community built on reciprocity and collaboration, people are free to get rich. In the change to alienation, the gain is comfort for many, great wealth for a few.

The loss is more difficult to tally. We have to strain to see the reality of the alternative through curtains of rhetoric, some dropped by the nostalgic, more by the apologists for capitalism.

The old life was simple, we are told. Absurd. Life was anything but simple when people in small groups, interrupted by storms and epidemics and marching armies, managed to raise their own food, make their own clothing, and build their own shelter, while creating their own music, literature, art, science, and philosophy.

It is less fatuous to speak of homogeneity. When I ask people in Turkish villages how they organize work at the loom or in the fields, how they control the flow of water, how they collect to build their own mosques, they answer that they have ḍırilık, unity. But their unity is an ideology designed to embrace multiplicity. From living with them, I know they are not homogeneous, if homogeneous means lacking in individuality. Everywhere I go, I find the same range of personality. In the agricultural communities of the mountains of Turkey, the hills of Ireland, or the delta of Bengal, the people are as diverse in psychological makeup, as various in private opinion, as my colleagues in the university. What they have, that my colleagues have in only a diminished version, is a theory of unity. That theory, held in separate minds, draws people into constant engagement.

Engagement — a fit contrast to alienation — puts us on the right track. The great poet W. B. Yeats was close when he said that country people, living hard up against life, have their minds ground sharp. Wisdom is too strong a word, but living in connection, engaged on the one hand with nature, engaged on the other with the neighbors, people know what they know. Their knowledge does not bob on the surface. It sinks and melts into the wholeness of their experience. They might be ignorant about distant matters, but they know who they are. Identity is not a hot topic among them.

Finding the rhythm of the universe during common work, they have learned how to make the land yield fuel and food, fibers to spin, and straw to cover the roof. At work with others, they have created their landscape of trim hedges, neat fields, and white houses on the hilltop. They have built the world they inhabit. In action, in engagement, they have learned from the environment about nature, and from the neighbors about human nature. They have learned what is possible and what is not, and they know they are capable. They know how to set priorities and act decisively. I am talking about the people called peasants. They know how, as individuals, they fit in the world. That knowing leads them to wisdom about as often as freedom leads people to great riches in another place. What they do not have is comfort and wealth. What they do have is confidence.

In Ballymenone, they speak of confidence in terms of faith and trust. You know the local environment, and you have faith that God will provide. He does. Hugh Nolan said he remembered no year so bad that the farmers, working diligently, failed to make their crop, the source of their food and cash. In this place, even in the time of the Famine, in the bad old days of rotten spuds and greedy landlords, the people endured. They found wild herbs on the mountainside, fish in the river. Faith and trust. You can trust people to act properly when they come through
the open door of your home. You can trust them to help in times of need. With you, they hold to a neighborly ethic, realized in little acts of reciprocity and cooperation, and founded upon our Lord's commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. In fact, they do not even like one another as particular individuals in particular moments. Differences of personality beget a plenitude of insults, fistfights, and lawsuits. Love is a sacred ideology, the foundation of the social system of trust. In bad times, when troubles strike, the neighbors assemble, someone takes the lead, and the crop is saved, the burned house is rebuilt, the lonely old man is fed.

Paddy McBrien sits in his house. He is a man of power. He knows exactly how his house was planned and built. It protects him adequately from the weather and provides a warm stage for social play. The neighbors round about know exactly who Paddy is. If he falls, they will lift him.

Secure in faith and trust, engaged with the environment, engaged with the neighbors, restricted in freedom, people are confident. They are not very comfortable, they are not rich at all. But they are not bent by the breeze of every fashion, disoriented by every change, frightened by every little noise. They are not lost in quiet desperation with only commodities to use in the struggle to construct a self.

Composition

We began with walls. It would have been as logical to start at the hearth. But I thought of the endless expanse of space, divided it with walls, and then wrote about what it takes to build them, how natural resources are processed and labor is organized. Had I begun at the hearth, where natural resources are transformed by fire into food, I would have made a beginning at the sociable center of life. Then imagining walls around us, just as Paddy McBrien and Tommy Moore did when they stood in the grass and planned Paddy's house, I would have concentrated, not on
VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

the walls themselves, on the materials of their building, but on the way they create divisions. Having two sides, walls work to include and exclude. Simultaneously, they make interiors and exteriors.

Architecture divides space for differential experience. It provides an exterior to see and an interior to use. One problem the designer must solve is how to make the exterior and the interior, appearance and function, fit together in a composition.

Though they mix in many buildings, there are two distinct approaches to composing a relation between the interior and the exterior. In one, a geometric figure provides the base for a unified envelope. Internal subdivisions, the conventions of use within, do not register on the exterior. The tipi of the Great Plains and the yurt of Central Asia are circular on plan, one shaped as a cone, the other as a hemisphere. Their geometric exteriors cover, rather than expose, the actions patterned internally around a central fire. In another approach to design, the exterior is the consequence of the life inside.

Standing in the gap between the medieval and the modern, the Wealden house of southern England displays its internal arrangements to a viewer from afar. Where there is a second story, it jetties forward, making its presence known. Windows, different in size and glazing, separate the rooms where people sit from the storerooms where agricultural wealth is kept. From the relation between the offset entry and the lofty hall in the middle, visitors are able to predict accurately the route they will travel from the wet, windy world to the warm place of rest and social exchange. The Wealden house stood as a proud monument to prosperity, and yet it remained generously accessible. It fit its transitional moment in history by belonging at once to the family and the community.

Looking ahead in time from the Wealden house, we will watch the jetties retract into smooth walls. The windows will settle on a single size and space themselves evenly. The door will shift to dead center. The new English house will become a geometric
unit that hides its internal operations. Pride will continue, but acts of entry will be interrupted. Visitors will no longer know where they will go or what they will find, once the door is opened and they are ushered along a passage through partitions.

Looking backward, we can see that the Wealden house was designed on the model of the parish church. Stepping down from the tower on the west, to the commodious nave, to the lower chancel on the east, the parish church assembled forms around uses. Its internal volumes expanded to shape its external appearance. The walls enclosed liturgical action. A door on the side, offset toward the rear of the nave and announced by a porch, tells you that you will enter, turn, and then proceed toward the rood screen that divides the nave from the sacred place of the priest. In like manner, you enter the Wealden house, turn, then walk toward the warm place of the master, the priest of the hearth. Behind him, a wall separates the hall where you are welcome from the private apartments reserved for the family. The Wealden house borrows authority from the church. Like the church, it builds form out of use, inviting people in, channeling their motion, then blocking them with a wall that breaks the interior into accessible and inaccessible domains.

Where space breaks internally, the community comes to oneness. In their church, the people assemble before the rood screen, taking communion, drinking the wine that is the blood, eating the wafer that is the flesh, creating among themselves the mystic body of the church. In the house, at exactly the same point in the plan, people sit together, drinking and eating, forming friendships and ratifying the sacred order of their community.

We call buildings like the Wealden house vernacular to give them distance, to prevent ourselves from casually using our own cultural assumptions during interpretations of buildings created by other people. In the study of vernacular architecture, one assumption we must dispense with is the familiar dichotomy of the public and private. Modern law makes clear distinctions between the public and the private, between kinds of real estate.
that individuals can and cannot alienate by sale, between places of access and places of trespass. People in rural communities construct a realm of rights between the public and the private. They shape a middle zone on the landscape where members of the community have rights of way and permission to exploit collective resources, picking windfalls in the forest, grazing herds on the commons. An understanding of architecture requires, at least, a recognition of the central realm of communal space, lying between private space and public. The nave of the parish church and the hall of the Wealden house were not precisely public or private. They were communal. Open to the community, they were not like the highway that was open to everyone, nor were they like the chancel of the church or the bedroom of the house that were open to only a select few.

The scene can be imagined: men and women, different in station, coming and going, mingling freely in the big smoky hall. In the grand old ballads, the hall was a place for feasts and murders. But exactly how the Wealden house was used is a matter, at last, of conjecture. There is no need to guess about the houses of Ballymenone.

Ballymenone’s most common house is not common in Ireland. It is historically akin to the Wealden house, the result of English settlement after the failure of the rebellion of Ulster’s chiefs at the end of the sixteenth century. The Wealden house and the old house of Ballymenone are similar in form. Both are centered by an open space rising to the rafters. A hall in England, it is called a kitchen in Ireland. Ballymenone’s kitchen is flanked by rooms, a parlor on one side, a bedroom and a pantry on the other. These rooms are private spaces, closed during the day, and entered only by invitation. But the offset front door is open to everyone who walks across the fields. It is bad manners to knock, worse manners to stop guests at the door. They enter, walk across the kitchen floor, and sit down by the fire, receiving hot tea and joining conversations that were going before they came, that will continue after they have gone. The space flowing from the hearth
and through the front door, running from fire to fire on the hill-sides, expanding through the fields and down to the bog where people have the right to cut turf for fuel and raise vegetables — all that space is not private. People cross it and use it within customary limitations. It is not private, nor is it public. Public space is restricted to the narrow tracks of the roads that cut through the countryside, carrying people who do not know the local etiquette and who, therefore, cannot enter communal space properly.

Communal space opens between the public and the private. As in the cognate houses of Ballymenone, as in the church of the parish, space in the Wealden house probably did not divide into public and private at the front door. The house, instead, divided the communal from the private at the wall beyond the high hall.

Not until houses became geometric units did private space and domestic space become coterminous. Even then the discrimination is not fine enough. The partitioned interior of the geometric unit contained working spaces to the rear that were entered casually, convivial spaces to the front that were entered formally, and recreational spaces that visitors entered at the risk of their lives. Access was different to the kitchen, the parlor, and the bedroom. Unifying those spaces with the name private thwarts rather than advances architectural analysis. In the house of my boyhood and in the house where I live today, the neighbors come through the back door and into the kitchen without knocking. People I do not know come to the front door and wait. If they get in, they go where I take them, probably to the kitchen. The bedrooms are for the family. The exception is my daughter’s room, which, being her house, often fills with her friends, who burn incense and listen to old-time rock and roll. This is to speak only of the house. Around it run outer rings, porches and yards, that segment space still more. The simple duality of private and public suffices for lawyers, but it is not complex enough or subtle enough to organize architectural study. The public and the private lie at the opposite ends of a wide spectrum of distinct spatial experiences.

Displaying its interior upon its exterior, the old Wealden house extended a communal welcome, and then divided space internally. It was like the parish church, and it differed from later houses in the way that the parish church, a building for the community, differed in its day from the great cathedral. A truly public building, the cathedral presented an imposing, geometrically composed facade. Like the human face, the facade was bilaterally symmetrical. The unity of two parts was also tripartite: like the triumphal arches of Rome, a tall door was flanked by lower doors, all offering points of beginning for motion toward the triumph over death represented by the cross.

In England’s domestic architecture, the aim of composition shifted. The old house had no facade. Its exterior was the consequence of its interior. Its interior was the result of patterns of use. Patterns of use brought communal and familial orders into interaction. The new house was simpler. It had a facade. A regular arrangement of regular openings, the facade obstructed entry, obliterating communal space in a wall that divided public space from an assembly of domestic places. To the public, the new house offered, like the cathedral, a mask of grandeur, figured in bilateral symmetry.

England’s change in domestic architecture, accomplished between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, was a shift from organic design, in which the exterior is the skin of the inside, to geometric design, in which the outside masks the interior behind a facade. The facade, a smooth surface punctured by repetitive openings, displays the aesthetic of artificiality. Like an industrial product, it hides rather than exposing the processes that lie behind it. But the geometric facade came long before industrialization, just as geometrically contrived building materials did. These smooth, repetitive things—the symmetrical facade, the squared timber and the squared brick—manifest the desire for order that drove the development of industrial procedures.

Walls separate insides from outsides. Buildings link insides with outsides. One linkage is created through the massing of
Architectural Decoration

Ornament creates an exciting tension within architectural experience when the inside and outside are treated differently. Ellen Cutler whitewashes the exterior of her house in Ballymenone. The whitewash confirms the unity of the building and separates it cleanly from its natural surround of muddy lanes and grassy fields. On its exterior, her house is solid and singular, artful in its massing and its unrelieved whiteness. Step over the threshold. The brightness of the whitewash continues in the buffed and polished surfaces of the things she calls ornaments: the brass candlesticks and enameled dogs on the mantel, the pictures and plates on the walls. But similarities are swept away by differences. The hard, plain unity of the exterior yields to the softness of textiles, to a busy, glittery dance of little things, to a rainbow of color and a happy cacophony of pattern.

The walls of her kitchen darken from smoke nearly as often as the walls outside darken in the wet weather. Nearly as often as she whitewashes the exterior, she papers the kitchen, covering its walls with running, repetitive patterns of medallions. Mud tracked in by the damned old men, when they come from the fields for their tea, causes her to scrub the floor every day. So it will shine, she covers the floor with a smooth sheet of linoleum that brings another pattern to her kitchen. And more patterns come on the strips of cloth that cover the tables, curtain the openings, and run along the shelves of the mantel and dresser.

Mrs. Cutler painted the fireplace green with big red dots, like the berries on the holly at Christmas. On the dresser, built into the wall across from the hearth, she arranges plates so they will sparkle or glimmer or glow with the mood of the fire. She calls the dresser's plates "delph." Her plates were manufactured in