

NEED FOR REGION SPECIFIC DOCUMENTATION AND RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE

Dr. Harimohan Pillai . Architect



A hands-on builder brings feeling, knowledge and experience in his act of building. Every time a building is constructed the builder is unconsciously doing modifications on what others have done before him in the past, within acceptable limits of prevailing norms and needs. In any particular region we can find three main considerations influencing architectural design.

1. People and their needs
2. Climate and its influences
3. Materials and the means of building

Self-built and community built buildings have come to be recognized today as vernacular or traditional architecture. The advent of modernism, industrialization, mass production and of late, globalization has, sadly enough, relegated the importance of region specific building into the background. Today's generation in our country is growing up seeing traditional built forms as holiday resorts or museum pieces.

Architectural forms are products of environmental conditions, material resources, structural systems and technologies. Several aspects of social structure, belief systems and behavioral patterns also strongly influence building types, their functions and meanings. Majority of buildings constructed on the earth is dwellings. Most of them are still built by their owners, helped by the community that pools resources, or by local specialized builders and craftsmen. Generally unknown and, until recently, little studied, these builders have shaped much of man's built environment. Termed variously as 'indigenous', 'non-formal', 'folk', 'rural' or a more respectable 'vernacular' by the main-stream architects, the built forms of traditional architecture everywhere have remained confined to the closed world of academics in our country. Occasionally one can see a building or two inspired by the 'traditional features', mostly for their visual, nostalgia evoking appeal.

The word vernacular is derived from the Latin 'vernaculus' meaning native. A language has grammar and syntax, style and manner of expression. In the study of languages the

vernacular is the local or regional dialect. The way languages the world over have linguistic traditions, buildings too have building traditions that vary from region to region.

Architect designed architecture is today formal architecture which may be termed as popular architecture. The breeding ground for popular architecture is the interface between town and country, known as suburb, itself a by-product in the environment after the Industrial revolution. As speculative development that boosts commerce, the suburbs complete the picture of popular architecture- with housing, shops, public facilities, places for entertainment and commercial services related to food and transport. Popular or formal architecture is supported by energy intensive, industrially produced construction materials and methods of construction. Driven by a speculative real estate needs of the growing urban life style, they are designed with a corporate, saleable imagery. Often such imagery reflects certain visual features of the local vernacular. or imported from far away lands. 'Neo-vernacular' is a term often used to call structures when they are designed by architects influenced by the forms of a vernacular tradition.. Kerala is full of them, since the Gulf boom in economy of the state.

What is perhaps interesting is that, all this is happening without any apparent efforts at picking up or maintaining the continuity of traditions of design and building by the trained, formal sector of architectural practice in India.

In the beginning of the 21st century, three centuries since the industrial revolution that shrunk the world and created an international style of architecture, a majority of people of the world still live, work and worship in vernacular buildings. While the greater proportion of urban buildings are architect-designed, a significant number are survivors of vernacular traditions.

A fairly large number of buildings in India exist in an environmental context. Whether in Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal or Jaisalmer, they are conditioned by the capacity of the land to support a given population, and the economy of the culture affecting the choice of site. The materials used for construction in all these regions are most frequently obtained locally from the natural resources of the region. The buildings protect their occupants from environmental extremes and create a micro-climate compatible with human physical comfort. Often a vernacular building in one part of the world displays solutions to structural problems that are similar to those in other regions. In technology, as in function, they may be seen to be typologically similar, though they are created and sustained through independent evolution and culturally accumulated wisdom.

In an area or settlement where examples of vernacular architecture abound, it can be seen that it has developed to meet the specific needs of the traditions followed, based on the social and economic needs. Not only individual structures, the spatial organization of the entire settlement, too reflect the essence of traditions followed.

Families seek proximity to kinsfolk and clan members, often based on the strong lines of caste system, and power of the higher caste in decision making for the rest of the community as in large parts of India such the Namboodiri Illams and Manais in Kerala. There are sites associated with ancestors, kuladaivam or kuladevata - the presiding deity of the

family or clan, as in most of South India. Specific customs associated with the growth of the family for example matrilineal growth and matriarchal inheritance rights in the Nair Tharavads of Kerala, can affect the location and settlement of growth.

Within these dwelling, customary norms in organizing and utilizing space persists through generations, requiring places for working and sleeping, or for the preparation and cooking of food. Often they are gender or hierarchically differentiated, changing rarely and only as societies change, with the slow influence of cultural invasion. A striking example of such a change is the addition of the Sofa-set and the dining table to every household in India.

In vernacular architecture the process of building is learnt by each successive generation as inherited knowledge and frequently there is a close association within the community, between the owner-builder-occupier. In some societies the craftsmen remain more specialized in the art of building- erecting, and they organize themselves in guilds (Gujarat-Rajasthan, the Sompuras) while in others the esoteric knowledge of construction in the form of rules, regulations, rites and rituals remain the preserve of the priest or the learned under whose guidance all constructions are done (Kerala, Tamil Nadu).

Thus vernacular architecture generally embodies community values, interlaced with symbolic concepts of the cosmos, even a simple dwelling reflecting both the material and spiritual world of its builders and users. Seeking a single definition of vernacular architecture will attempt to reduce the richness and diversity of these traditions to a simplistic description, inevitably diminishing them in the process, yet Paul Oliver offers the following as a working definition of vernacular architecture:

“Vernacular architecture comprises the dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental contexts and available resources, they are customarily owner or community built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produce them.”

Before 19th century, mention of vernacular architecture is seen only in the notes of travellers or ethnographic researchers. Formal study in this discipline gained importance as a part of administrative requirements during the spread of colonial rule in parts of the world, to get to know the native culture better for effective administration. With the turn of the 20th century and development in formal architectural education and training on the modern lines, interest in the vernacular theories and styles of construction took a back seat ending in invoking only nostalgia among a section of practicing architects. With popularity of the international style in the modern, rapidly industrializing world, cultures that survived for thousands of years, as in India, were subject to pressures for change. Lands and mineral resources were exploited in the name of development. Industrial materials and quick to erect, mass producing technology were adopted and the traditional forms of building were rejected. Gradually, the numbers of practitioners of the science and art of vernacular-traditional construction dwindled as both the people and the political powers that be started looking at the vernacular medium as a sign of backwardness. The result was slow destruction of the vernacular environment and replacement by housing projects. Crafts skills were displaced by machine tools. Curiously enough as we move into the twenty first century, a certain kind of nostalgic and romanticized interest is seen to develop among

professionals and public alike in the vernacular traditions. Replica details of old structures, dismantled doors, windows, columns and other parts are finding a place in current practice of architecture and interior design, under a new term - ethnic. Thus we have vernacularisation of popular architecture; the romantic image replacing the authentic.

Academia recognized the importance of the conservation of vernacular environments in 1975, when the Council of Europe Committee on Monuments and Sites declared that architectural heritage meant not only the monumental, but also the 'groups or lesser buildings in our old towns and characteristic villages in their natural and man-made settings.' Today there is an expanding awareness of the importance of vernacular architecture in many countries. These concerns are not only international, but also interdisciplinary. Yet there is general unfamiliarity with the subject among the academia and the professionals, due to lack of concerted efforts at systematic study, documentation and research on the subject. There can be no single approach to appreciate vernacular architecture. Academia can explore the scientific characteristics of vernacular architecture and identify the essence and fundamental principles of building to incorporate in the formal architectural education curriculum. Architectural profession of each region should try to relate contemporary design to the regional traditions. An appropriate architectural approach can uncover the logical and organizational principles, and bring techniques of analysis to vernacular buildings, with a definite bearing on the present and future of architectural design.

