REFLECTIONS ON ARCHITECTURE:
VERNACULAR AND ACADEMIC MODES
IN ARCHITECTURE AND TOWN PLANNING

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> A house — in American thought — an apple, an American vineyard have
> nothing in common; house and apple have nothing in common with the
> plantings so thoroughly penetrated by the ancestors' hopes and concerns
> Experienced and animated things, things which share our knowledge, decay
> and cannot any more be substituted for. Possibly we are the last ones to
> have experienced these things. Our responsibility is not only to preserve the
> memory of them (that would amount to little and be very uncertain); we
> must preserve their human, their "fireside" values.

> —Rainer Maria Rilke

INTRODUCTION

The paper which we present here is a brief theory-slanted summary of a
work, "Contemporary Architecture and Town Planning." It was written by an
interdisciplinary working group attached to the magazine, *Texts de Critical
Aesthetics*, associated with the University of the Basque Country in Spain. After
the earlier publication of a special issue, "Other Modern Architectures" (devoted
to a critical analysis of modern architecture), and some reevaluations of marginal
trends such as vernacular architecture, our group has developed a different line of
investigation. The new focus is not only theoretical but practical, and we have
been able, by looking at architectural changes, to explain the reasons for cultural
changes at the end of the twentieth century. The essence of this paper is to
provide some of our theoretical conclusions, which were arrived at by contrasting
vernacular and academic ways of building. We have also touched upon some of
the same subjects in another paper appearing below in this issue; its title is,

"Critical Remarks on Rural Architecture and Town Planning in the Basque Country: The Case of Navarre, 1964-1994."

It is important to emphasize the fact that our work springs from an intense aesthetic experience, although we do also include anthropological and philosophical components in our analysis. In this sense, our work owes a debt to the concept of "aesthetic anthropology" developed by two Basque artists. One is also a theoretician, Jorge Oteiza, whose methods are in some ways similar to those of Wilhelm Dilthey. However, our work is more directly indebted to the Basque artist, Xabier Morrás, of the Fine Arts Faculty of the Basque Country.

Our multidisciplinary method is close to certain new trends in the humanities and social sciences (compare the work of Clifford Geertz, Paul Oliver, and Ivan Illich, among others), which have at their base a philosophical and aesthetic framework, which clearly determines certain basic concepts, comparative methods, and invaluable attitudes. We maintain that studies in contemporary architecture and town planning should not adopt a dispassionate attitude toward supposedly alien realities; on the contrary, our approach is seriously engaged, from a standpoint which will allow us to elucidate both problems and solutions in a more accurate and complete way.

As is well known by many homesick Basque emigrants who have been received into the USA since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Basque Country still retains as the core of its entire culture the traditional farm house (*baserri*). However, social, economic, and technological changes taking place now have impacted the anthropological and aesthetic integrity of that institution in a radically damaging way. It is on the basis of our unique knowledge of this case—immersed as it is in a process of total transformation—that we think we can contribute to a general understanding of the process of cultural change that is evident today in contemporary architecture and town planning. The vernacular mode of the traditional farm house and the academic mode of "neovernacular" farm house can serve as examples to explain two opposing conceptions of human dwelling. Ultimately, the contrast may also lead to solutions—to the concrete proposals that are needed to conceive of a better approach to the planning of buildings in the future.

VERNACULAR VERSUS ACADEMIC MODES

The differences between vernacular and academic architecture were not as important in the past as they are today. Both modes of thinking about construction, in the past, were very much alike, because the vernacular mode was the source of the academic mode. In the architectural landscape of towns and villages, vernacular lodgings—alongside palaces and churches whose styles were international in origin—harmonized with their surroundings in a real, physical sense. Both materials and building techniques were similar, with the result that both immediate and profound aesthetic results were harmonious and complementary. In well preserved villages dating from the Middle Ages, it is easy to see this: the buildings designed by early academic architects and constructed by the craftsmen of the time—though they often incorporated foreign styles—took on local features and became a stylistic synthesis of particular concepts of space, structure, form, and function. After the Renaissance, the gap between architecture as a professional career and vernacular architecture has grown larger—in spite of a few instances of harmonious coexistence and mutual enrichments emanating from both sides.

In a broad and secure cultural environment, there can be academic buildings, complete in themselves, which are nonetheless inextricably linked to vernacular buildings, with each highlighting the other against a background of their mutual genesis. These buildings stand in the same relationship to their source as the vernacular mode does to Nature; that is, they stand in a delicate state of dialectical tension that conceptualizes, stresses, and ultimately reinvents the balance between architecture and landscape, between civilization and nature. Vernacular building is integrated within nature because the latter is and functions as a counterpoint to the work of the artisan, validating vernacular architecture as a whole.

Today, the fragile balance that had been maintained for centuries has been destroyed by the spread of modern architecture. The dominance of functional rationalism, paradoxically, derives from the vernacular mode (as   Adolf Loos and others have pointed out) as a result of an admixture of new industrial materials. The result is a second stage of academic architecture: modern academic architecture, which is no longer aesthetically confronted either by the earlier vernacular architecture or by nature. Standardization, purity of line, and universality of architectural models—all of these lead to contemporary attitudes that ignore or deny the vernacular/nature relationship without substituting new

aesthetic values. New buildings in the academic mode are not involved in a
dialogue with the architectural past, whether vernacular or historical. When
modern criteria come to dominate, the vernacular mode is either abandoned or
ruled out as illegitimate; what appears to be relevant instead is the false diversity
of neovernacular models. These models have no roots and do not compensate for
the dearth of aesthetic quality that defines the basic rationalistic approach. The
last and the worst consequence of this historical process is that vernacular
architecture itself is subjected to reconstruction (sometimes called restoration)
within the modern academic style. This destroys the anthropological and aesthetic
essence of vernacular architecture.

     The present situation in building patterns can be summarized briefly. The
modern academic mode dominates urban architecture throughout the world, with
vernacular architecture hanging on only in some third-world regions. As a
consequence (and leaving aside other remarks that might be made), the natural
aesthetic quality of vernacular architecture has been displaced, substituted for by
an ugly architectural rationalism or neovernacular kitsch. Our dwellings have lost
that irreplaceable anthropological quality that is common to vernacular homes,
and all in the name of a supposedly functional notion of comfort. Along with the
degradation of the concept of a dwelling goes the serious degradation of the
quality of life of contemporary human beings. It is clear, though difficult to
measure, that the anthropological/ aesthetic integration of a wood house on a
ranch—harmonizing as it does with its various outbuildings and the
environment—is infinitely superior to a concrete block dwelling or a modern
motel. Even the most heroic attempts to fuse the modern with the vernacular—by
way of cottage-style ornamentation or pseudo-villa construction—have in a short
time revealed themselves as no more than the creation of ornamented relics.
European neovernacular styles—one example is the neo-Basque pseudo country
estate—are good examples of how adding superficial popular features cannot
achieve the aesthetics of the vernacular mode without turning everything into a
pastiche. For instance, modern "author's villas," using materials from vernacular
architecture and pretending to integrate the homes within some natural
environment (aping Frank Lloyd Wright's famous "Fallingwater") are unavailable
to most people, and it is unclear whether they achieve anything aesthetic.

     If we want to understand the basic ideas of construction that are manifest
in the vernacular mode of architecture—ideas that have been commented upon

admirably by a variety of authors, from the poet Rainer Maria Rilke to the philosopher Martin Heidegger to the essayist Henry David Thoreau, from the writer James Agee to the town planner Charles Alexander to a whole host of others—it is necessary to extract a set of features that inevitably, in every part of the world, have produced habitable buildings that are anthropologically and aesthetically pleasing.

The five principal features that we propose as the foundation of the vernacular mode are these: (1) The builders, whether artisans or those planning to live in the buildings, are non-professionals. (2) There is harmonious adaptation, using natural materials, to the geographical environment. (3) The actual building involves intuitive thinking, without blueprints, and is open to later modifications as is customary with the outbuildings on farms. (4) There is a balance between social/economic functionality and aesthetic features. And (5) architectural patterns and styles are subject to that slow evolution of traditional styles that is suited to ethnic regions.

These features—which make no attempt to describe or define the vernacular mode according to any strict scientific criteria, merely pointing out basic conditions for a true vernacular architecture to exist—would be the direct opposites of another set of five features characteristic of academic architecture: (1) The builders are professionals, with technical specialties. (2) There is maladjustment, hostile in a formal sense to the environment, and prefabricated materials predominate. (3) Thinking is rationalistic, using definite designs. Global patterns and styles gradually become identical in all cultural areas. (4) There is a loss of balance between social and economic functions, on one hand, and aesthetic and symbolic values on the other. (5) There are increasingly universalized models and styles in progressively standardized zones.

It is obvious that the radical differences between the two modes affect all the features involved in the construction of a dwelling. This leads to very large dissimilarities in the aesthetic and anthropological features of the two kinds of dwellings. At the present moment, the gulf between the two modes is the widest it has ever been. Up to the twentieth century, features (2) and (4) in the academic/modern list had not yet appeared; and feature (5) had not become fully manifest. By looking at the transition from the vernacular to the academic mode of architecture, we can draw conclusions about the direction of the modern

economy and modern technology, as well as, in the final analysis, about the global changes that they have produced.

The real reasons for our present world situation do not accord with an analysis that would hypothesize a succession of architectural styles—modern follows baroque and is in turn supplanted by postmodern, or something like that; rather, the true explanation is to be found in an underlying struggle to produce a totally modern mentality. Within architecture, the academic mode has imposed itself as exclusive, excluding, forbidding, caricaturing the vernacular mode. The loss of balance mentioned earlier, when the previously less dominant academic mode could no longer coexist happily with the vernacular mode, led inevitably to a historic change in which the academic mode of architecture was forced to embrace—in a massively abstract and functionalist way—the whole architectonic of the theory and practice of building in every region of the world. The dominance since the beginning of the twentieth century of the first two features on the academic list (above) has, frankly, led to vernacular architecture being considered authoritarian, too narrow in its philosophical bases to suit the pluralism that is needed today. It is no surprise, then, that almost no alternative architectural movements (think of Stalinist architecture) have managed to break through the basic patterns and philosophy of modern architecture.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE VERNACULAR

Although the modern/academic mode of architecture has displaced the vernacular, traces of the latter still exist. The possibility of building a house with one's own hands—which is in fact the essence of the vernacular mode— will always remain marginal in our civilization. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the vernacular is not only a unique and special approach to building; it is also a form of life that will always be attractive to human beings. Whether it is as pioneers in a new land or in the enforced isolation of extreme poverty, like new Robinson Crusoes, human beings will always be drawn to the vernacular, to building houses for themselves. On the other hand, there is a problem; it becomes apparent when this vernacular drive is forced to survive in an environment dominated by the modern/academic mode of architecture. When an individual attempts to build for himself a second home in the first world, or when people build their own homes in shanty towns in the third world, it is easy to conclude what the dominant philosophy of the developed nations is.

In outlying areas of large third world cities—in Africa, Asia, South America—sprawling shanty towns, made with a great variety of materials, have appeared. Massive migrations from the land to the big cities (or reverse invasions in Africa of rural areas by urban dwellers, as studied by Massia and Tribillion) have produced strange effects, the result of skillful and resourceful people living in a rationalist architectural culture but forced to use vernacular modes of building. Although these people would have preferred to live in dwellings of a more modern type, the demands of their poverty have forced them to reinvent a degraded vernacular architectural mode; that is what we mean by "shanty."

This style of building—in spite of some specialists who claim it does not meet the criteria of architecture—does match features 1-3 of the vernacular mode (above). It certainly does not match features 4 and 5 of the academic mode. It is not really a synthesis of the two modes but an incomplete, altered version of the vernacular mode. Shanties are built by their own inhabitants, with no blueprints, using materials available in the immediate environment; however, because of difficult and particular circumstances, no attention can be paid to social/economic function, nor to planned aesthetic values. Moreover, the diversity of building patterns depends on a random availability of a great variety of building materials. As this shows, a shanty is no more than the vernacular mode attempting to adapt to an urban environment.

From our point of view, the shanty town has its own aesthetic and anthropological values—which could, in some ways, be said to be better than the majority of our modern, vulgar dwellings. In saying this, we are not clamoring for the maintaining of shanty towns because they have aesthetic merits (however unclear); we are simply admiring the presence of something indefinable, something that every truly human action has. Just as buildings, with the spontaneity of their layout of dwellings, their "town planning," the shanty towns tell us—leaving aside our social and economic prejudices— something about the immutable human will to build. In its own way, the building of shanty towns shares something of both vernacular and academic architecture.

The phenomenon of shanty towns has a history, from New York's Central Park squatters' shanties in 1869, built of wood and iron slabs, to the troubled *favelas* of Rio Janeiro today. Nowadays, in the first world, the phenomenon is not a major concern. Indeed, in some countries (including our own), shanty building has been transformed in a specific form of unplanned rural

buildings—primarily, as a method of discriminating against certain ethnic minorities such as Spanish gypsies. Nevertheless, there is a threat looming in the future, by way of massive migrations from the third world, and we cannot ignore the possibility that shanty towns might again become realities in the first world in just a few decades.

We would like to make a proposal, which might be considered utopian, even impossible: if it turns out to be impossible to stem the tide of immigrants from the third world, with their vernacular architecture, then we should give them the resources and materials to organize themselves within their own parts of cities, even within their own cities. We think the best way to achieve a multicultural future involves, at least, avoiding a despotic integration of foreign cultures within our architectural and town planning patterns, allowing them instead to develop their own patterns. In short, we should show respect and permit coexistence. Past failures of cultural assimilation—resettling nomadic ethnic groups such as the Spanish gypsies, or the Jewish *fhalasas*—show through direct experience, the plausibility of our proposal. At the very least, this complex phenomenon should be studied, including all of its implications— for example, aesthetic and anthropological consequences—if we are to achieve political or legislative answers to the problems of these communities in the future, while at the same time we avoid rigid, utopian concepts of modern architecture. Doing this might bring us closer to a natural flexibility of practice similar to the vernacular mode which worked in earlier centuries.

VIRTUAL ARCHITECTURE

On the other side of the architectural coin from the degraded vernacular symbolized by the shanty towns is an extreme academic mode, represented today by what is called virtual architecture. The five features of today's academic mode, listed earlier, have taken a great leap forward as a result of computer graphics techniques, which can provide simulations that closely approximate reality. Dwellings of the future—simulated to the last possible detail before construction even starts—cannot possibly allow us to approximate features 2 and 4 of the vernacular mode (natural adaptation and balance between function and aesthetics)—features that, in the past, were shared with the academic mode. The routines of standard software along with a weak traditional artistic training, lead to the imposition of a kind of highly sophisticated technological architecture that,

nevertheless, is vulgar, aesthetically speaking. Architecture becomes the simple
combining of set procedures, controlled by computers, and reduced to a single
pattern— essentially a variation on an eccentric deconstructive rationalism. The
distance of the architect from actual building and concrete materials that is
imposed by computerization creates a vulgar, functionalist architecture. This is
because, in past times, it was direct experience with materials that provided the
foundation for an architecture that was valuable in aesthetic terms. In this way,
we have transformed an anthropologically sensitive event—the vernacular mode of
architecture—into a mere technician's exercise—the academic mode of
architecture; and we end up with a dehumanized specialization, the virtual mode
of academic architecture.

        With this most recent trend in modern architecture, the virtual mode, it is
only possible—in spite of its immense power—to follow patterns imposed by the
criteria of large-scale functionalism. And no alibis of famous international
architects can hide the fact. Furthermore, the technical possibilities that computer
graphics allows have so mesmerized the utopian minds of modern town
planners—who came to do complete town plans with the redesign of whole
metropolises—that they now want to extend their designs to the countryside.
When such visionaries of science fiction as Arthur C. Clarke begin to work with
the new cyberspace architects, we will have achieved the dream of a Crystal
City—and we will, at the same time, have completely destroyed the natural beauty
of human involvement that is the authentic mode of human building.

        The imaginative, virtual trend of the academic mode has actually been
implicit within it from the beginning. For example, the Venetian Paolo Grassi's
exhibition of models of the most famous Renaissance buildings provides a
fascinating demonstration of the human ability to project magnificent visions in a
kind of virtual architecture. The hands of these geniuses created the modern
mode of architecture that we have inherited, along with the ability to fire the
artistic imagination. By now this legacy has decayed to the point of the
Taylorized prefabrication of spaces that are barely habitable. Virtual reality and
other technologies, admittedly, do not necessarily set up a barrier blocking
humane and aesthetic architecture and town planning. The large models which
Sangallo and Michelangelo made of their Vatican buildings demonstrate that.
Michelangelo chose the simplicity—revolutionary at the time—of his dome instead
of the pretentious baroque of Sangallo. Although both projects appear marvelous

to our eye today—partly because of the sheer immensity of the models, done
almost to real-life scale—it was possible even at the time to make a choice
between the two dreams on the basis of aesthetic criteria. So architects today
should be able to choose a best vision, an elaborate and complex vision, one that
is closer to our past with its vernacular essence; they should be able to forget
about the bare and cold nightmare that contemporary technology is offering us.

CONCLUSIONS

        Nowadays, it seems all but impossible to recover the vernacular mode of
building. We hardly dare to undertake even the less ambitious approach of
returning to older academic modes (in opposition to modern and virtual academic
modes). The most recent architecture is no longer an art but has become simply a
technique, subject to uncontrollable economic, technological, and social pressures.
Our only hope is that the more creative and sensitive architects and town
planners—in the context of some future crisis—will look backward toward those
aspects of the vernacular mode that, because they are compatible with some
features of the academic mode, suggest possibilities of survival. For this to
happen (and it would be in spite of our criticisms and our proposals), there is at
least a possibility that, in the middle future, such styles could again become
attractive, even stimulating. Until such a hypothetical moment arrives, we will be
unconvincing, we think, if we limit ourselves to vague and rhetorical criticisms or
complaints against architectural modernity. From both a theoretical and an ethical
point of view, we are obligated to put forward a set of reasonable and realistic
proposals in light of the way things actually exist.

        In a general way, it would be necessary to mount a campaign for a new
cultural policy awareness focusing on the vernacular heritage of each country.
This, in summary form, would involve two proposals: (a) governments would
need to promote and support the vernacular mode wherever it still exists. And (b)
government officials should also be lobbied to offer legislative protection as well.
By way of these two proposals it might be possible to retain something of the
vernacular mode—though only to a limited extent.

        In the crucial field of educating architects and town planners, we would
urge both the rethinking of current attitudes and the introduction of new subjects
topics. We can reduce our proposals to four: (a) teaching traditional artistic

design (drawing, painting, and sculpture, along with the values they impart—of color, texture, etc.), with the teaching being done by artists and aimed at empowering future architects; (b) teaching the history of vernacular architecture (taught at the same level of importance as the history of academic architecture); (c) reconsideration of how computer-assisted architecture is taught, with a view to avoiding the degradation of skills that is implied in simply learning to copy patterns; and (d) getting students to build a final project themselves, or at least to get involved in someone else's building. (This would ideally be followed by more advanced efforts—e.g., learning masonry techniques—after graduation.) If all of these things were introduced, we would produce more skillful architects, sensitive to vernacular values and closer to older modes of academic architecture.

        With respect to the actual construction of new dwellings, the situation is more complicated—partly and regretfully, because everything depends on lawmakers and politicians, who are insensitive about these matters. Here our proposals can be broken down into six points: (a) There should be the widest possible use of vernacular materials as well as natural materials in harmony with the environment. (b) If prefabricated materials must be used, their treatment and the techniques involved in their use should come as close as possible to natural materials and the vernacular mode. (c) Prefabricated materials should be provided in different versions, leaving a high degree of flexibility for aesthetic purposes (e.g., bricks of different colors rather than all the same). (d) There should be new patterns, avoiding large mass dwelling units (e.g., family-sized units allowing for the reinvention of the vernacular within local traditions). (e) Rural imitations of urban building should be rethought, with special attention to the anthropological features of older vernacular centers and to aesthetic features in accord with both the natural and the built environment. And finally (f) there should be strict oversight, with sanctions against those who ignore style in their projects or who fail to follow requirements of the law, especially aesthetic requirements.

        Failing on all these counts is the mark, the predominant ideology, of today's architectural elite—of all of those who practice rationalistic modernism in any of its versions. There are exceptions, of course, and a few isolated architects have produced dwellings of high aesthetic value (consider Hassan Fathy and Charles Alexander)—which shows that our criteria are feasible— could be made compatible with modern modes, and would in the end be highly beneficial in these last years of the twentieth century with their rigid architectural culture.

All of our remarks and proposals to preserve the vernacular mode are based on our familiarity with what is happening today in the Basque Country; the proposals may sound strange in an environment where people are so rapidly substituting the modern in place of the vernacular, but that makes our remarks all the more pertinent. Our goal is modest, to provide some theorizing that will lead to intellectual debate—which may sow seeds that will germinate in building better dwellings in the future. The architectural creativity of our century, faced as it is with urgent challenges, should not abandon a thousand years of vernacular culture. We might even hope that in the future there will be a renaissance driven by a longing for the old modes of building and dwelling—a longing, we think, for essential human values.

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