FUNCTION IN FOLK ARCHITECTURE

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In the amount of time that is available to us this morning, I can't hope to deal with any subject in any great detail. My announced topic is "Function in Folk Architecture," and I want to preface my remarks on folk architecture with a few generalizaticns concerning function in folklife studies. I'm afraid that relatively little attention has been paid to functional consideration by folklorists and folklife researchers in this country despite the example given us by anthropologists and others. There are probably a number of reasons why this is so. Collectors in the past, for example, have tended to concentrate on a single genre and have made no attempt to relate their collections to other aspects of the culture. In a large number of instances, too, folklorists have found that the items they are interested in are no longer functioning in a total context. That is, they have encouraged informants to dredge up from their memories items which they no longer use. An informant may, for example, describe a custom which has died out and the collector has no opportunity to observe its relationships with other aspects of the culture. I would suggest, however, that partly as an end in itself, partly as a basis for further research, more attention should be devoted to function in folklife studies.

Historical reconstruction and diffusion studies, which have occupied most researchers in the past, are of great significance, but they need to be supplemented with functional studies. In examining an artifact, for example, one needs to know how old it is and whether it's found over a wide area or restricted to a small one. But one should also know, among other things, how it was used, how it was made, and why it was made of certain materials if one is to understand its true significance. It seems to me, too, that functional considerations are relevant not only to the study of folklife, but these same functional considerations can help in understanding a number of problems in contemporary urban American society. In keeping with the theme of our conference, "Applied Folklore," I would like to suggest that functional considerations are far more relevant in this area than are historical studies and distributional studies. If we can see how a traditional item, be it of material or non-material culture, actually works in context and how it is related to the culture as a whole, we can probably find practical applications for this knowledge. It seems that some attempts to make practical applications of folklore in the past have been less than successful because many functional considerations were ignored. I think of attempts to introduce crafts programs which have been unsuccessful because the directors of the programs have ignored the ways in which the close relationship between the craftsman and his customer in the past influenced the craftsman's designs, his choice of materials, and his attitude towards his work.

One area of folklife research where there is a great opportunity for functional studies is folk architecture. Indeed, one of the outstanding features of folk architecture which helps to set it apart from fine architecture or academic architecture is its functional quality. Not only does the function of a building dictate its size, its shape, its location, and the number, size and nature of the openings in it, but the ways in which it is built and the materials used in it are determined by a number of functional considerations such as availability of materials, durability of materials, ease with which materials can be worked, and so on.

On the other hand, in fine architecture, the appearance of the building, the effect the building will have on the beholder often seems to have been of greater importance than the use to which the building would be put. How else would we explain a railroad terminal built to resemble a Roman temple or a Gothic cathedral, a building with vast areas of useless space, and a building which was impossible to keep clean and soon became coated with soot and pigeon droppings. Or consider mansions built in the second half of the nineteenth century with towers sprouting from the roof, and buildings covered with ornate gingerbread trappings which were easily broken and hard to paint and keep clean. Surely the architects in these instances emphasized appearance rather than practical function.

Twentieth century architects, too, have often ignored practical functional considerations. The National Trust for Historic Preservation recently acquired and moved a house in northern Virginia which had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright had emphasized the horizontal elements in the house design to the point of insisting that all the wood screws exposed in the house should have the slot in the head perfectly horizontal. When the house was moved, though, it was found that it was full of termites and large amounts of infested material have had to be replaced with new material. Here's an obvious case where no detail affecting the appearance of the house was too small to escape the architect's notice, but he overlooked an important practical and functional detail -- termite-proofing.

To return to the question of studying function in folk architecture, let me further note that there are still extant many examples of folk architecture. Indeed, folk architecture is still being built today. There are many knowledgeable people still living who can tell the student how a building was used and why it was built as it was. As an example, let me mention a personal experience.

For some time, I was aware that many traditional houses had windows and doors on the front and back but none in the gable ends. I was unable to understand the reason why this is so. Finally, though, it struck me that where I had seen delapidated houses with windows in the gable ends, the wall beneath these windows was usually badly rotted from rain water which had run down the wall and leaked in around the window. On the back and front sides of a house, though, the overhanging eaves keep a great deal of water from running down the walls. I now feel that this is primarily the reason why gable end walls usually do not have windows in them.

Let me deal now with a few concrete examples of different aspects of function in folk architecture. One concerns changes in function and their effects on buildings. Large barns with rectangular floor plans are a common feature of the rural landscape in many parts of this country. Their main function is very apparent. Animals are stabled on the ground floor, and vast quantities of bulk hay are stored in the hayloft above to be fed to the animals during the winter. In many parts of southern Indiana changes in agricultural patterns have taken place which have rendered these barns obsolete, as many farmers have told me. One of the earliest changes was the introduction of hay balers which greatly reduced the bulk of the hay and made the huge hayloft unnecessary. A complicated series of developments led to abandoning dairy cows and concentrating on beef cattle. Because southern Indiana is hilly, arable fields

are often small, of irregular shape, and separated from one another by ridges, patches of trees, and creeks. Hence, large scale mechanized farming with huge tractors and combines is impractical in this area. Farms tend to be small, and the farm owner often works at a fulltime job in some factory so that he has only evenings and weekends to devote to the farm. Most farm produce cannot be raised in any quantity under such circumstances but beef cattle can be. Farmers tell me that while dairy cattle need shelter in a barn during the winters, beef cattle do not. They are left out in the field year 'round and bales of hay are hauled to them from stacks built on the ground and covered with plastic. I asked one young farmer if beef cattle wouldn't be better off in the barn during particularly cold weather, and it does get cold on occasion in southern Indiana. He said they would be, but said that if cattle were kept in the barn manure would accumulate which he would then have to pay to have hauled off to a dump. Perhaps no clearer example of changing agricultural patterns and attitudes can be given than this. The big barns, therefore, are not used. They're not well adapted to storing equipment. Therefore, they are not maintained and many are disappearing rapidly. Most of those that remain in southern Indiana must be considered as functionless relics, not long for the scene.

Another aspect of function in architecture concerns the connections between building patterns and ways of life. For some reason I've been recently noticing a clear pattern concerning the large front porches on houses. I've not worked on this pattern in detail, but it seems to me that most houses built in towns, between about 1875 and say 1925, had large front porches -- porches large enough so that the family could sit on the front porch in the evening in pleasant weather. Moreover, front porches were often added to older houses during this period. Special kinds of furniture were made during this period, too. A furniture factory in Martinsville, Indiana -- Old Hickory Furniture -- is about 20 miles north of Bloomington. The factory specialized in front porch furniture. It was common for families to sit on the front porch and visit with neighbors and passersby. Since World War II, however, the pattern has changed. A quick drive through residential districts which have sprung up in recent years will confirm the fact that most modern residences do not have large front porches. Instead, the patio at the rear of the house is more common. I can only suggest a few reasons for this change. I suspect when the automobile was frequently used that it became less pleasant to sit out on the front porches because of fumes and dust and the impracticality of talking to a person who drove by in an automobile. Another factor would be the prevalence of radios first, and now television sets. I suppose many families would rather sit inside and watch television than sit outside on a front porch. In a broader way, though, it seems to me that contemporary families are more concerned with privacy than with being neighborly. Hence the front porch is no longer built, though of course, many still exist from earlier decades.

One final functional pattern may be discerned in traditional building practices, practices which most modern builders ignore. Examples can be drawn from New Harmony, Indiana where a religious group with close ties with the Pittsburgh area founded a town in the early nineteenth century. The houses which they built there are a combination, it seems to me, of German and Anglo-American folk architecture in folk building pattern, folk building techniques. Fortunately for the student of

function in folk architecture, a writer has lived in New Harmony for many years. His name is Don Blair, and while he doesn't consider himself a student of folk architecture, he nonetheless is a close student of the buildings in New Harmony, and since he lived there over a period of many years, he's been able to observe these houses over a long period of time. He's been able to see some of them torn down and re-erected, to see some of them moved, and so on, and as a result has gained a number of insights into the practical reasons why the houses were designed and built in the way they were. He mentions some of the advantages of these houses. He says, "Here were built livable houses, economical to maintain, well insulated, centrally heated, functional and pleasing in design, and fire resistant, weather and storm-proof, termite-proof, and with many other advantages. I'll cite only three of the points which he discussed. The frames of these houses were so well designed that, he says, it has been possible for some of the houses to have been moved as many as four times without any damage to them. These moves have been made without benefit of modern house-moving equipment. In some instances the houses were moved on rough, uneven rollers shaped from logs. As a rule, timbers were laid on the ground to make a rude track and to prevent the rollers from settling into the ground. The power for pulling the house forward would be supplied by a stump puller which would be anchored to trees along the route the house was taken. A house's ability to withstand such treatment very eloquently attests to the effectiveness of its planning and subsequent execution, he says. A second point concerns the plastering of the houses. Blair says many of the houses have never been replastered, and the walls are in good condition and the bond between the bricks and the plaster is still solid. Because of their choice of materials and their use of certain sound principles of design, even the large areas of the living room ceilings are still smooth and show no tendency toward cracking. The final point which I shall mention concerns the exterior of the houses. Blair says, "Visitors to Harmony reported that many of the frame houses were not painted, and the silver-gray of the unpainted wood was outstanding." One of the houses that was razed in 1945, that is 130 years after it was built, one of these houses had never had a coat of paint. The weather-boarding and the exposed members of the frame were in such good condition that they were used in rebuilding other houses. The houses were designed so that the rain ran off before the boards were water soaked and damaged. Well, it seems to me in this area that contemporary builders, contemporary architects, could learn a great deal from studying, observing the functional practical features of folk architecture. Unfortunately, as many of us who have lived in houses that have been built in recent times can testify, the builders have ignored many of these old traditional practices, and as a result the houses do not last anywhere near as well as those built in New Harmony lasted, and can't be expected to last anywhere near that long.

Bibliography

Bon Blair, Harmonist Construction, Indiana Historical Society, 1962.