

Vernacular Architecture: Towards a Sustainable Future.* C. Mileto, F. Vegas, L. Garcia, V. Cristini, eds. Boca Raton: CRC Press, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015. 784 pp.

Reviewed by Nora Pat Small

This volume emerged from the congress VerSus2014| 2nd Mediterra| 2nd ResTapia—International Conference on Vernacular Heritage. Composed of 131 essays, in no discernible order, plus the two plenary lectures, it provides us with a global view of the ways people are grappling with the twin issues of building sustainably and sustaining historic buildings and landscapes.

The essays' authors, from throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Russia, Europe, Central and South America (with perhaps one North American contribution) virtually all, in one way or another, explore either how to preserve the vernacular built environment in the face of modernization, or what modern construction can learn from the historic vernacular. Architects, archaeologists, historians, ethnographers, anthropologists, urban planners, structural engineers, and architectural historians contributed to the discussion at the Conference and are represented in these essays. The scope of the work encapsulated here is difficult to convey in a short review, but runs the gamut from strictly historical investigations to technical materials analyses for seismic resistance.

Vernacular Architecture provides the reader with a vivid argument for the role of humanists, and humanists working with scientists, in addressing pressing social, economic, and political issues. There has been much hand wringing in the U.S. press of late about the lack of humanist or public intellectual contributions to public debates. These authors, practitioners all, are in the field, gathering data, talking to residents, seeing and thinking about the effects of globalization and climate change on local economies and cultures. We cannot know from this volume to what extent they each have a public audience in their respective homes, but they are asking important questions, and their ideas deserve a public hearing. C. Mateo and A. Fernandez, for example, explore why it seems so difficult to scale up urban regeneration projects (471-476). Several authors examine urban vernacular landscapes as complete systems in order to better understand the forces at work in destabilizing those neighborhoods and cities. Rural and urban scholars alike ask how to preserve traditional architecture when the social and cultural traditions that sustained them are lost or transformed, which in turn raises the question of why try? The answers are as varied as the disciplines represented.

While these essays are testament to a wide array of important and interesting projects being undertaken throughout the world, they are also illustrative of the problem of defining and preserving “the vernacular,” as well as heritage, within living communities. Many authors assume or argue for the value of the pre-industrial landscape, and the knowledge of those “ancients” who built it and who are presumed to have been closer to their respective

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environments than modern humans. A romantic, even reverent, tone prevails in some essays, preventing the investigators from looking too closely at the values that may actually have shaped that pre-modern landscape.

At the same time, the contemporary vernacular built environment is unacknowledged or dismissed as hopelessly degraded by modern forces. The problem, though, is that in those places where historic sites and neighborhoods have not been abandoned, they have often been adapted in ways deemed inappropriate by preservation and heritage professionals. Can a new vernacular grow from understanding the features that made the old vernacular sustainable, even though the socio-cultural fabric that allowed it to endure has come unraveled? Can a new vernacular be imposed by cultural authorities? Programs that integrate the study of local, sustainable building systems with building trades and architectural training promise, at the very least, to question the received wisdom of international, standardized industrial building methods that have ignored local conditions and traditions. The authors who explore this idea recognize that new construction can be far less destructive, far more sustainable, than is currently the case. Meeting new emissions standards depends on this kind of work. The problem remains, though, of what to do with the old infrastructure, and the answer must necessarily depend on whether that old landscape is being preserved as a living entity or as a museum piece. Is it possible to be both?

All told, *Vernacular Architecture* is an eye-opening overview of global investigations of the sustainability of the vernacular landscape, as well as of sustainability through increased understanding of vernacular building traditions. The book desperately needs an index. Being able to quickly access all of the seismic studies (at least eight), or all the essays on rural abandonment or urban planning, or those that discuss new construction based on local vernacular principles, for example, would be very handy. In addition, some of the translation is so poor as to render a few essays incomprehensible in English. In spite of that, we should hope that a similar conference will result in a similar volume in another decade or so, giving us a fair view, once again, of the state of the field.

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