

Houses without Names: Architectural Nomenclature and the Classification of America's Common Houses.* Thomas C. Hubka. University of Tennessee Press, 2012. 112 pp.

Reviewed by Michael Ann Williams

The second volume in the Vernacular Architecture Forum's special series, *Houses without Names* shares many similarities with its predecessor, *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture*, published in 2005 and recently released in a new edition. Both books are short (less than 100 pages), written in accessible styles, and amply illustrated. While the first volume, by Thomas Carter and Elizabeth Cromley, served as an introductory text to the subject, Thomas Hubka bravely takes on the thorny issue of nomenclature and classification in vernacular architecture.

I have to admit that I approached the volume with some trepidation. Typologies have long been a source of conflict and disagreement among vernacular architecture scholars and I doubted whether the matter could neatly be resolved in 93 pages. With relief, I found that Hubka is not proposing a typology, but arguing for the importance of classification and nomenclature and suggesting an approach to achieve successful systems of naming. As Hubka argues, the "lack of interpretive nomenclature has in no small measure guaranteed that the bulk of common houses is poorly understood, marginalized, and predictably ignored" (10).

In tone, the book ranges from manifesto to survey manual. Hubka is a tireless advocate for the common houses that have slipped beneath the attention of both architectural historians and vernacular architecture scholars alike. Generally vernacular architecture scholars have a commonly agreed upon, if inconsistently, nomenclature for more traditional systems of building, but this is often not the case for those dwellings labeled as "popular." Even as attention has turned to the mid-20th century, scholars tend to be drawn to those common houses and domestic landscapes that are named (Lustron homes, Eichler homes, the Levittown developments, etc.). Houses that are not named often slip by without notice or are condemned as conformist "little houses made of ticky- tacky" (to quote Malvina Reynolds). Hubka battles against elitist notions of conformity, arguing that "the overwhelming experience for most Americans, as well as from most people worldwide, has been to live in communities where broad housing unity (with minor degrees of individual expression), not diversity, is the overwhelming pattern" (90).

Even if one is not about to tackle an architectural survey (or "census," as Hubka prefers), *Houses without Names* offers numerous insights. The "myths and misconceptions" Hubka addresses in the first chapter are perhaps familiar arguments to long-time vernacular architecture scholars, but will be useful to neophytes. In the same chapter Hubka makes a useful distinction between "plan" and "form," a difference often not acknowledged in past nomenclature debates over names such as "I house" (coined by Fred Kniffen based on form, but often used in reference to a specific plan) or "four square." Significantly Hubka also argues that styles viewed as "national" are invariably contextualized by local builders "in response to local/regional needs, constraints,

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and preferences” (40). Therefore a census of a particular region will reveal that a handful of locally dominant types within a much larger national repertoire characterize a local landscape.

Ultimately Hubka suggests that a successful nomenclature should be based on façade and, more importantly, plan. While most vernacular architecture scholars will be sympathetic to the primacy given to floor plan, Hubka’s discussion of spatial use, “interpreting the historic rhythms of domestic life” (63), seems rather wrong-headed in some aspects. Surprisingly, the book misses the nuances of how multi-layered and complex spatial use within one and two room houses can be by imposing modern conceptions of room function. Viewing a small house as “kitchen (work) centered” ignores how functions may be divided conceptually, spatially, and temporally without physical division. The labeling of spatial division in two room houses into kitchen space and living/bedroom space is just plain incorrect in the context of many patterns of traditional use (and similar incorrect assumption are the basis of the misinterpretation of space in many historic house museums). Within English-based traditions, “hall and parlor” in fact says it right; to the extent that divisions were made conceptually by room, the distinction was between formal and informal space, not between the functions of cooking and sleeping. Even if we look at what activities actually took place, rather than how space was conceptualized, both rooms in the hall and parlor or double pen plans were potentially used for sleeping, while neither room was exclusively reserved for cooking. While Hubka argues that “there are only a few basic ways to organize the rooms in houses with three, four, and five rooms to accomplish the basic tasks of domestic life” (91), oral history and ethnographic research tells us otherwise.

“All houses are created equal” is Hubka’s rallying cry and the passion and insights of *Houses without Names* makes the book worthwhile reading. Although the heyday of federal and state funded comprehensive architectural surveys has passed, we can hope that scholars and citizens will take up the cause of the systematic “census” of local housing and use the book to recognize that even national, popular styles have common (and limited) local manifestations. In suggesting a scheme for classification, the author never quite resolves the issue of analytic versus structural modes of categorization (and tends to lump both into his proto-types) but he wisely avoids suggesting that we abandon existing nomenclatures, advocating for a classification system that is ultimately driven by conducting a local census. If all the reader takes away is “pay attention” to ALL housing, then the book succeeds.

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