

***Invitation to Vernacular Architecture: A Guide to the Study of Ordinary Buildings and Landscapes.* Thomas Carter and Elizabeth Collins Cromley. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005. 248 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Michael Ann Williams

With *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture*, the Vernacular Architecture Forum and University of Tennessee Press inaugurate a new series on vernacular architecture studies. The authors of the premiere volume, Thomas Carter and Elizabeth Cromley, use as their inspiration, both in title and intent, James Deetz's classic of the 1960s, *Invitation to Archaeology*. The work is a concise, "crash course" in the study of vernacular architecture. This book, however, is by no means a field guide. Carter and Cromley make no attempt to present various regional or ethnic typologies. Rather the authors walk the reader through various definitions, field techniques, and frameworks for analysis. The intent is to introduce the student to the how, not the what.

With a text of less than one hundred pages and illustrations drawn from a variety of sources, *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture* is likely to serve as an inviting entrée for the student. However, conciseness does have its limitations and those not new to the field may question the omissions and the simplifications. In the brief overview of the development of the field, for example, why does cultural geography receive such short shrift? Fred Kniffen, who certainly deserves recognition as one of the significant founders of the field, receives only a passing mention, and then, only as a mentor to folklorist Henry Glassie. Perhaps the most troubling oversimplifications within the book are the presentation of certain orthodoxies, both methodological and theoretical, as if they are accepted by all within this complex, interdisciplinary area of study.

Several times the authors assert that "fieldwork" in vernacular architecture study consists of the recording of buildings with measured drawings. Certainly measured drawings provide a wonderful document of a structure, but there are countless vernacular architecture scholars, both academic and in the public sector, who primarily pursue other methods of documentation. Fieldwork techniques in vernacular architecture deserve a separate volume or volumes and they will undoubtedly be forthcoming in the series. In *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture*, Carter and Cromley tend to be too doctrinaire in what they present as proper fieldwork technique; at the same time, the volume is too brief to be truly instructive. Students, particularly those not enrolled in programs within schools of architecture, may simply assume that they do not have the requisite skills to pursue this area of study. In that case, the "invitation" appears to be more "black tie only" than "y'all come." The brief section on photography is equally puzzling. Few students will have access to, or ever use, a camera with a parallax-correcting lens. However, many students (particularly those hired to do architectural survey) will find that they are more likely to use photography than measured drawing in their future jobs, and some more fundamental instructions on taking good photographs of buildings would be appreciated. The

¹ Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* October 11, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.wordpress.com/2007/10/11/mar-2007-2-21/>. © 2007 Michael Ann Williams.

vexing issue of obtaining archival-quality digital prints, which affects anyone who prepares a National Register nomination, also deserves some consideration.

Oddly enough, after suggesting that measured drawings are requisite in vernacular architecture studies, the authors assert in chapter three that “drawing buildings, however valuable, is not the main concern of our work” (p. 45). The buildings must be analyzed and interpreted. Again they state an axiom that not all vernacular architecture scholars may be comfortable with: buildings represent an “unmediated” record of human action (p. 65). If that is truly so, do we even need interpretation? Are we really sure that in making “mute buildings speak” (to paraphrase the book’s foreword), we are not practicing ventriloquism, rather than interpretation (p. ix)?

Despite my quibbles with the author’s statements, *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture* does give the student a good introduction to the field. In many ways, chapter four is an antidote to some of the assertions of the first half of the book, giving the reader a solid acquaintance with a variety of interpretative approaches within vernacular architecture studies. The use of illustrations from diverse studies also gives the student an appreciation of the range of work encompassed within the scholarship. In chapter five the authors wrap up the book with an in-depth look at a single structure, an early twentieth-century double house in Buffalo, New York, by applying several different interpretive strategies to the building.

I recently used this book in my Vernacular Architecture course at Western Kentucky University and the students responded positively to it. The book functions precisely as it should, giving a comfortable introduction to the field without being overwhelming or trying too hard. I assigned the book as the first reading of the class and, supplemented by a variety of articles drawn largely from the Vernacular Architecture Forum’s *Perspectives* series, it provided a firm foundation for the semester. We have long needed an introductory textbook in vernacular architecture; Carter and Cromley should be applauded for taking on this daunting task.

Michael Ann Williams is Department Head and Professor in the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology at Western Kentucky University. She is the author of numerous works, including the books Homeplace: The Social Use and Meaning of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), Great Smoky Mountains Folklife (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995) and, most recently, Staging Tradition: John Lair and Sarah Gertrude Knott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).