

Vernacular Architecture in the Twenty-First Century

Theory, education and practice

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Traditionalism and vernacular architecture in the twenty-first century

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Introduction

The study of architecture and its theory has posed a continuous dilemma over the centuries. Especially after positivism in science and philosophy prevailed, architecture remained rather crippled, placing itself neither as an objective enquiry as in science, nor as a speculative and personal form of expression as in the arts. As far as its theory is concerned, architecture as a field of knowledge and as an area of practice occupies perhaps the most obscure place among both the sciences and the arts. It is a field of enquiry where the end product, the building, is formed by a process of design and is based on experiential values. Although the latter may be considered a reflection of the 'soft' values of art, they are implemented through the hard and verifiable knowledge of applied sciences, i.e. engineering. Therefore, in the tree of knowledge of the philosophy of science, architecture falls between the hard and soft realms of scientific enquiry. To be objective and therefore scientific is an ambition of positivist thinking in the design process. However, when the so-called scientific pursuit is over-exercised, the meaning of the process, one that relies so heavily on creativity and psychological factors, is reduced.

Throughout history, architecture has informed its practice simultaneously in terms of values and aesthetics, which have been recognized as the mission of the profession, and in terms of safe and correct building methods. Therefore the theory of architecture is a collection of disparate contributions that

combine the ideas, missions, assertions and approaches of many individuals. In the end, the theory is actually the literature that expresses and externalizes findings, convictions and manifestoes in literary form. When there is a prevalent agreement on what is 'good', or 'beautiful' for that matter, the theory becomes instructive and valid. When these agreements are challenged, alternative movements arise and spawn change.

Throughout history, we have witnessed distinct eras when these common agreements were effective among architects. The discourse of Ancient Greek and Roman as well as Renaissance architecture was based on these openly expressed theoretical assertions. However, this open transmission of knowledge was challenged by Gothic architecture, when the original theoretical premises being developed were retained by master masons as trade secrets, and only discreetly transmitted orally to following generations, in order to safeguard the know-how of the epoch (Rykwert 1988: 31–48). Subsequently, Neo-Classicism and Modernism returned to what had previously prevailed, enjoying open agreements to guide the profession. The theoretical discourse consisted mainly of proliferations and of variations on agreed valid principles of architecture.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Modernism has encapsulated and declared itself within two slogan-like assertions: those of Adolf Loos, 'Ornament is crime' and Louis Sullivan, 'Form follows function'. Modernism, addressing the aesthetics of industry and mass production, developed in leaps and bounds and became the uncontested *lingua franca* of architecture. It not only flourished in many other expressions of art, but also became the political manifestation of 'progressive' thought. Although this 'progressive' tide coincided with the worldwide spread of uniform, tedious and uninteresting buildings and urban environments, it would be unfair to blame Modernism for this, as these undesirable consequences were mainly the result of profit driven enterprises. Nevertheless, the distorted use or abuse of Modernism has been regarded by many as a set of values and premises that lacks respect for cultural identity, historical continuity and climatic relevance.

The reaction to Modernism took many forms, starting with post-Modernism, a short lived movement, inspired by shallow ethics. Unlike Modernism, which found expression in other fields like painting, sculpture, music, dance and industry, post-Modernism emerged within architecture and spread to other fields rather thinly. The notable exception to this is in the field of literature, where post-Modern structure was employed by many authors to great effect, significantly enhancing the quality and breadth of contemporary writing. The post-Modern movement was tirelessly preoccupied with reflections on meaning, historical continuity and the expression of identity.

From another angle, a 'revolutionary' movement known as the 'Architecture of Freedom' became a widespread repudiation of any control. Here Modernism was not revered. This was a denial of the need for political and planning control over building practices by the people themselves, who took the initiative to solve their own, primarily housing, problems. This movement based its discourse on *de facto* construction, generating vast settlements like the

favellas and *barrios* in South America, the *basti* in the Indian subcontinent, the *prospika* in Greece, the *bidon-villes* in North Africa, the *kampung* in Indonesia, and the *gecekondu* in Turkey, all of which took off in the aftermath of the Second World War as 'people's solutions' for housing in rapidly urbanising countries. Recognition of this form of building as a solution that challenged the incapable institutional (or, for that matter, Modern) architecture, one that did not cope with the dynamism of the vast post-war demand, found its catch phrase in John F.C. Turner's declaration: 'Freedom to build' (Turner and Fichter 1972; Turner 1976).

The third and perhaps most influential reaction is traditionalism. Traditionalism's focus on research in vernacular architecture and the revitalization of traditional building practices placed it critically in the centre of architectural theory.

Vernacular architecture research

Many have contributed to the research on vernacular architecture, including Bernard Rudofsky (1910–87) and Paul Oliver – two pioneers in the subject's recent history.¹ Rudofsky did not have an academic interest or similar pursuit when, in 1964, he put together an exhibition of traditional architecture at New York's coveted Museum of Modern Art. The title itself was a challenge to the profession: 'Architecture without Architects' (Rudofsky 1964). Indeed, Rudofsky did not address the familiar discussion about whether or not builders who create spectacular architecture ought to be considered architects. Instead, he provokingly brought to the fore and introduced onto the agenda of world architecture an area of architecture that had, as yet, gone largely unnoticed and which used to belong solely to a rather hidden field of academic architectural research. Suddenly, edifices that had been kept within the field of interest of human geographers, folklorists, anthropologists and architectural scholars became a subject of wider architectural interest.²

Paul Oliver, an artist whose main research interest was the origins of Blues music, discovered an enormous wealth of architectural expressions. From among many qualifications for this form of building, he borrowed the term 'vernacular' from linguistics and opened a vast field of exploration. In his first book, *Shelter and Society* (Oliver 1969), he quite eloquently and thoroughly places vernacular architecture within the discursive history of architectural theory. He orchestrated the subject by generously voicing the research of a wide spectrum of, particularly young, researchers worldwide, including myself, allowing me to present one of my first research papers to an international readership. Oliver crowned his dedication to the subject with a three-volume *magnum opus*: *The Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Oliver 1997a).

Since the early 1970s, thanks to Oliver and his followers, research in vernacular architecture has developed into a respectable academic field and has yielded extraordinary findings. Vernacular architecture research filled the biggest vacuum within architectural theory: the lack of laboratory conditions within the theory of architecture, which previously had prevented the discipline from deriving valid and verified knowledge from cases and field studies. Research done in

the realm of vernacular architecture embraces social, economic, cultural and technological aspects of architecture and describes and analyses how buildings emerge and are sustained through cultural processes. The research carried out on this premise also seeks to understand the historical depth behind architectural formation and development, together with the cultural and environmental factors that are involved. As one might expect, vernacular architecture research, a truly multi-disciplinary field, not only expanded the scope of architecture but also provided niches of academic interaction, offering faculty members the opportunity to work with people from departments outside their own. This led to the emergence of a new field of academic enquiry, which defined its scope as architectural anthropology, using the research techniques of anthropology, enriched with those of architecture (e.g. Amerlinck 2001). In short, vernacular architecture research became a mainstream academic activity, using processes of objective analysis and evaluation for architecture by displaying its determinants in their contextual entirety and historical continuity.

Until Paul Oliver's appropriation of the term 'vernacular', architecture that evolved from within communities and perfected itself with the test of time in conformity with societal, climatic and technological conditions was referred to by many different terms. The term 'traditional architecture' emphasized a process that had culminated in built form, one that is sustained by tradition as the binding tissue of that particular society. For those who named it 'primitive architecture' (Guidoni 1975), it meant that the architecture in question contained the basic necessities of society in their simplest form. When it was referred to as 'folk', it signified that the architecture formed part of the ethnographic premises. The term 'indigenous' architecture regarded this form of building as a particular and original aspect of building in a definable geographical setting. This type of architecture was also referred to as 'anonymous', given that the buildings did not have any significantly determinable architectural authorship. Finally, in the same vein, the term 'un-institutionalized architecture' was used in some academic discourse to define the same phenomenon. Thus, the term vernacular defined the subject by embracing its entirety, including the complexities of societal and cultural processes (Oliver 1969).

In the relatively short period of the three decades since then, hundreds of academics have explored vernacular architecture within their reach and presented their research in international fora. One of the leading media for sharing the outcomes of vernacular architecture research was established by Jean Paul Bourdier and Nezar AlSayyad as a part of the Centre for Environmental Design Research at the University of California, Berkeley. Their first international symposium, entitled 'Traditional Dwellings and Settlements in a Comparative Perspective', in 1988, brought together more than one hundred papers and as many scholars, sharing a similar interest. Their seriousness of purpose was made clear as these symposia continued to take place periodically in many different countries and on a range of different themes, making this newly founded institution an important medium for interaction and the exchange of findings on this particular subject.

Vernacular architecture in the history of theory

Throughout the centuries, those who have theorized on architecture have attempted to define the genesis of architecture or the point zero condition from which architecture originated and developed. The earliest known architectural treatise that deals with this issue is by Antonio Filarete di Averlino (Filarete 1965). In his well-illustrated treatise, he focuses on that episode in human history in which the need for shelter first emerges. Although his work concentrates on the origins of architecture, Filarete's initial aim was not to write a book on the subject, but to foster interest and try to persuade Lord Sforza of Florence to build a new ideal town named Sforzinda, by relating his vision of architecture and urbanism in the form of evening stories. In concordance with the monotheistic faiths, human life on earth is explained by the Biblical legend of Adam and Eve and their eventual expulsion from Paradise, where perfect conditions precluded any need for shelter. Only on expulsion from Eden did the prophetic couple and, thus, humankind, encounter the harshness of earthly conditions and climatic realities, and thus the need for protection. A simple shelter as a means of protection for survival during this period is Filarete's explanation of the genesis of architecture.

Filarete does not take a ready-made set of circumstances as the generic mode for his theory. Instead he returns to the basic necessities of refuge for human beings in order to discover the origins of architecture. From a religious perspective, the point of genesis comes from Adam and Eve's need to protect themselves as they are driven out of Paradise. At this point, Filarete refers to the sticks and leaves as the most original and pragmatic aspects of building. Filarete's point of departure, from the essential as opposed to the formal conditions, aims to have a sound, generic and unquestionable beginning for architecture and its theory. Unfortunately, others did not share this line of thinking until as late as the mid-eighteenth century, when a similar understanding was defended by the French architectural theorist Marc Antoine Laugier using the concept of *beauté primitif*. Laugier took the same primeval existence and named it 'primitive beauty', prior to his elaborate discourse on the 'high' architecture of his time.

In his most important and probably most influential works, the eighteenth-century French theorist Laugier bases his discourse on the rudiments of architecture. His two editions of *Essai sur l'Architecture* (1966), which were released in 1753 and 1755, and his *Observation sur l'Architecture* (Herrmann 1966), twelve years later, reflect the mainstream theory of the period.³ This is not surprising given that Laugier essentially adhered to the line of classical theory, only rarely diverging from it. Nevertheless, his written work remains a valuable contribution to the most up to date establishment of classical, normative, canonic aspects of architectural theory.

This judgement does not aim to underrate his various efforts. Laugier, for instance, derived the basic rules or reasons for the existence of architecture by referring to the primitive hut, a popular reasoning even in today's architectural discourse. Laugier's point of departure for architectural principles, which is

reflected in the frontispiece of *Essai*, is probably the same generic pattern followed by those who search for the governing and generic patterns of architecture in the vernacular mode of building. Laugier asserts that the first step in architecture begins with four sticks and beams to connect them, i.e. the rustic hut. The hut becomes a generic, iconic model for architecture from which many issues have been derived. In that respect he reminds us of Filarete's story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise.

By taking the 'rustic hut' as the generic model for architecture, Laugier makes a revolutionary leap from the Renaissance analogy that deduced all its laws and principles from 'Man'. Laugier's contribution is extremely important, because it brings reason as opposed to dogma into architectural thinking. Primarily, the Vitruvian model in which a creation of God, i.e. man, is analogous to man's own creation, i.e. architecture, is replaced by a point of departure where ideas and valid results are generated from an archetypal solution to man's necessity for shelter. Laugier takes an analytical view of the subject, as opposed to an 'unquestionable dogma' of an analogy, which would be impossible to validate.

When we compare Laugier's 'rustic hut' with Filarete's archetypal shelter with 'four posts', we may conclude that Laugier takes up a pre-Renaissance position on the genesis of architecture. But he does so with a difference in purpose: he intends to derive the basic principles of architecture analytically instead of pandering to the scholastic dogma of the Renaissance, a dogma that arose from prescribed analogical paradigms.

Contemporary architectural discourse and traditional building practices

As previously mentioned, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the prevalent paradigm in architecture has been Modernism. Even though it dominated both educational theory and the practice of architecture, reactions to this prevailing 'ideology' have never subsided. Over time, Modernism, with its strong roots, has become diversified and has developed a plurality of its own. We may categorize this plurality within the following seven groups.

The first group comprises those who unquestionably adopt the minimalist architecture of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the Modernist principles of Walter Gropius as they were initially set out and declared. Minimalist modernism as an expression of progress claimed to be valid for any geographical or cultural context. Gradually it became not only a conviction but a lifestyle, and even a political attitude towards the built environment. Architects who committed themselves to this approach have adopted it as their mission. Minimalist internationalism in time became the most challenged and criticised aspect of Modernism, as it not only ignored the cultural and climatic aspects of life, but also ventured to reform them.

The second group of architects consists of the followers of Le Corbusier and his simple and sublime expressions, explained by his affinity for the Mediterranean. This opened up avenues to explore a valid Modernism for different cultural and specific climate settings. Perhaps the most prominent

architect in this respect was Alvar Aalto, who developed a new Modernism specific to Finland, without making any compromises to Modernist principles. Luis Barragan, Geoffrey Bawa, Tadao Ando, Charles Correa, Balkrishna Doshi, Rafael Muneo, Ricardo Legoretta, Alvaro Siza and Sedad Eldem can be mentioned among the hundreds who are committed to culture- and climate-specific modern architecture, which has been referred to as 'modern regionalism'.

The third group of architects can be called 'new moderns'. They do not diverge from most of the principles of Modernism, yet they do not take 'function' as the basic determinant of form. On the contrary, they believe that when function is underplayed, a huge area opens up for free expression by engaging many means and techniques of contemporary design. Architects such as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Peter Eisenman, Wolf Prix, Renzo Piano, Daniel Liebeskind and Santiago Calatrava are generally held to belong to this group.

The fourth group embraces those who made the visions and the ambitions of the Archigram Group a contemporary reality: the use of the most sophisticated contemporary technologies and the highest possible precision for building. Jean Nouvel, Norman Foster and Richard Rogers are the pioneers who sustained this line of work and designed notable buildings of our times.

The fifth group is made up of those who from the outset regarded Modernism as a rigid canon that would limit original and creative expression. In their opinion, architectural design should not obey any limitation of expressiveness. Talents like Antonio Gaudi, Hans Scharoun, Paolo Soleri and Bruce Goff took risks by not taking part in the mainstream. They remained on the margins and maintained a vivid line of opposition to all, obliterating modernity.

The sixth group of architects blindly obeyed Modernism, but did so lightly and with creative cynicism. They regarded the realities of life, as they manifested themselves in building, very seriously. Their main opposition to Modernism can be seen principally by their lack of symbolic references to identify buildings within their context, their past and with the aspirations of their clients. Theoretically led and enriched by Charles Jencks, this reaction became a short-lived movement spanning the two decades from the 1970s to the 1990s, and gave rise to many novel expressions. Charles Moore, Robert Venturi, Paolo Portoghezi, Aldo Rossi, Rob Krier, Rifat Chadirji and Richard England are mentioned as the proponents of post-Modern architecture.

The seventh group are the conservatives who believe in the wisdom and accomplishments of the past and commit their careers to perpetuating history. Even though this group shares a similar discourse, social aspects divide them into two fundamentally different sub-groups. On the one hand, classicists who enjoy the royal support of Prince Charles, and who have been represented by Quinlan Terry and Leon Krier, believe that whatever was built in the past is good enough for the urbanized world to repeat in most loyal form. By doing so, they believe, we respect our architectural heritage and enjoy more culturally relevant urban environments. On the other hand, traditionalists, who in essence hold similar aspirations, have a mission that is more geared to the rural environments and the use of appropriate technologies.

Traditionalism and Hassan Fathy

Traditionalism in architecture cannot be discussed without taking a close look at the Egyptian architect and activist Hassan Fathy (1900–86), who single handedly challenged Modernism.⁴ Through his discourse and influence, Hassan Fathy has come to occupy a 'saintly' position in the world of architecture, even though he has not enjoyed a similar degree of success or recognition with regards to his own architecture. His honesty and determination have made him a hero among generations of architects who, like him, respect the social concerns present in architecture, and its mission.

Hassan Fathy's strife and commitment to architecture was an endless battle and has endured long after his death. He symbolized his own convictions by keeping a statue of Miguel de Cervantes's timeless character Don Quixote in his bedroom as a continuous reminder of man's aspiration to help those less fortunate. In literature, Don Quixote has become an icon of honesty, conviction, perseverance and a continuous struggle against power and those who possess it. The symbolic association between Fathy and the protagonist was very clear, and was understood and acknowledged by his visitors over the years. Fathy also dedicated his life to an uncompromising struggle against the prevalent forces of internationalism, which he felt were becoming the architectural reflection of 'modern society'. He regarded internationalism as a forceful intrusion that obliterates the meaning and social consciousness of architecture. He was cognisant of the fact that he was engaged in an uphill battle, but took little notice. He persevered throughout and in the end left us with an enormous legacy. In time, he had radicalized his position and turned it into a battle against the totality of institutionalized architecture. After seeing a building with a curtain wall and mirrored glazing, he once remarked to me: 'Look at the architect. He is so much in shame with his own design that he only dares to reflect the architecture around it.'

The intrinsic creativity, modesty and dedication of Fathy and his architecture have never been denied, even by those who do not share his vision. However, his failure to garner support from the social forces in which he had confidence has been widely used as proof that the traditionalist approach used and pioneered by Fathy does not work. This was clearly illustrated when two of his rural resettlement projects, New Gournia Village and Bariz Village, failed to succeed, even though this disappointing outcome was due in large part to pre-existing social and economic realities, rather than to the settlements themselves. The inhabitants of Gournia had originally based their livelihood on local clandestine archaeological digs, and so when prompted to move, they refused to do so as they did not want to risk losing their only source of income. This refusal to resettle scathed Fathy's work methods, which relied heavily on communal participation. In fact, Fathy had ingeniously re-mastered the traditional Nubian vaulting system of mud bricks without using any wooden formwork, instead stacking bricks at a slight angle and resting them against a wall to form vaults. Although this was a very simple construction technique, it yielded well-insulated, comfortable spaces and impressive, robust architectonics for architects and non-architects to admire.

'Building with people', Fathy's main thesis, did not hold for Bariz Village either.⁵ In the end, Fathy was criticized not for his architecture per se, but for the negative reaction of the communities involved. In short, the very people to whom he had dedicated his mission very sadly rejected him. Naturally this was not a deliberate reaction on their part, or one targeted specifically at him, but the indirect result was a betrayal on behalf of those whom he loved and wanted to help the most. Fathy's priority had been to improve the living conditions of the poor by using appropriate architecture, but the outcomes of his endeavours led him instead to the design of exquisite stone masonry villas for the well-to-do intelligentsia of Cairo. Cynics, envious of Fathy's international reputation, voiced this contradiction with slogans such as: 'He is writing about the poor and building for the rich.' However, they deliberately ignored Fathy's underlying belief that if the leaders of Egyptian society would appropriate and make good use of his architecture for their high aspirations and lifestyles, the underprivileged would follow suit. But this dream did not materialize, at least not in his lifetime.

In the end, Fathy divorced his beloved wife over a trivial argument (the music of Johannes Brahms) and dedicated his life to his powerful discourse and intellectual existence. His residence, which he shared with more than thirty cats, was a portion of an old Mamluk house next to Saladin's Citadel on Darb el-Labbana, and soon became frequented by many who admired his mission and wished to benefit from his wisdom. His permanent appeal to those interested in talking to him, or at least listening to what he professed, took the form of an invitation to join him for tea every afternoon. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, having tea with Fathy was considered a deed, a responsibility or perhaps a ritual not to be missed. He was possibly the only internationally acclaimed person for centuries whose door was open to everyone. His outward reach and hospitality linked him with people all over the world – which is how I met him for the first time in 1969, and then many times after. Fathy had clearly become an undeclared *guru* for alternative architectural discourse.

Fathy's followers

Many who deliberately chose his discourse and benefited from his talks became important architects and activists, perpetuating his mission in their work. Among these, many have received the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture including: André Ravereau (Mopti Medical Centre, Mali, 1980), Abdelwahed el-Wakil (Halawa House, Egypt, 1980, and Corniche Mosque, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1989), Jak Vauthrin (Pan African Institute for Development, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 1992) and Fabrisio Carola with Vauthrin (Regional Hospital, Kaedi, Mauritania, 1995). When classicism dominated architectural discourse in the late 1980s, the Egyptian architect Abdelwahed el-Wakil always referred to Fathy's prophesies with pride. He was also among the pioneers of the classicist movement, along side Quinlan Terry and Leon Krier.

As important as these individual accomplishments in architecture may be, groups have been formed that have institutionalized Fathy's teachings and refined his mission in order to use architecture for human, social and economic

development. One of Fathy's dedicated followers, John Norton, together with Alan Cain and Farokh Afshar, established the Development Workshop (DW). This group coupled international consciousness and economic support with local needs and technologies, blending all with architectural wisdom. They have since become one of the outstanding forces in socially responsible architecture, a helping hand working to bring architecture into the social realm.

In addition to its social and technological concerns, DW has distinguished itself by commitment to the protection of nature, by developing materials and methods of construction that take into consideration the scarcity of natural resources. DW started work in the mid 1970s in Iran and later became involved in Angola, Vietnam, Mali and Mauritania. In each of its projects, DW developed innovative and appropriate technologies based on abundant and readily available natural materials. Moreover, in order for the projects to be successful in the long run, they regularly implemented very thorough training programmes for local builders. Over the years, DW has received funding from many international organizations and continues to enjoy the support of the international community in general, who wholeheartedly share the wider environmental concerns.

Among the DW projects is 'Woodless Construction', an initiative not to use scarce wood in geographical areas of sub-Saharan Africa that are susceptible to or already suffering from desertification. Supported by the United Nations Organization for the Conservation of Nature, 'Woodless Construction' in essence is faithful to Fathy's legacy and teachings of Nubian vaulting and doming without wooden formwork construction systems.

Hugo Houben is another follower of Fathy's who frequented his tea meetings for many years. With the help of Patrice Doat, he established CRATerre (Centre for Research in Earthen Architecture), a research centre based at the University of Grenoble that immediately gained the support of Jean Dethier. Dethier was responsible for organizing the legendary earthen architecture exhibition entitled 'Down to Earth', at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and became the director of CRATerre's architecture section. This exhibit tirelessly travelled the world for two decades and was viewed by millions; it has been as influential as was Rudofsky's exhibition.

Houben, a civil engineer, had a very pragmatic and in many ways scientific approach to earthen construction. CRATerre established laboratories and workshops at the University of Grenoble to test various technologies of earth construction. Mud bricks, compacted earth, earthen building blocks with reinforcing additives and *pisé* were among the materials they investigated. In the field, they demonstrated fast building techniques and displayed prototypes. Their prototype of a primary school building in Somalia and their Exhibition Centre in Riyadh attracted professional interest.

Perhaps the most interesting exercise that CRATerre conducted was in collaboration with the local authority of the new town of Ile d'Abeau in southern France. It involved the commissioning of five architects to design, and five contractors to build, a series of houses. This experimental project aimed to encourage architects to use mud and mud bricks as the principal building

material, and to allow them to explore possibilities in mud construction techniques. These houses have now been in use for more than fifteen years and convincingly prove that the material, mud, indigenous to the Lyon region, can be put back into use. The serious commitment of the local authority in Ile d'Abeau to make use of local resources, an approach long espoused by Fathy, was rewarded by naming one of the streets after him, 'Rue Hassan Fathy', as a gesture to recognize and eternalize the great architect. It is worth noting that no such recognition has yet been made in Fathy's city of origin, Alexandria, or in Cairo where he spent most of his life.

CRATerre also conducted major housing projects using appropriate local materials other than earth. Their involvement in mass housing in Mayotte spanned more than two decades and provided hundreds of houses. In various types of compounds, different house types, architectural solutions and site plans were all executed in respectful appreciation of the plurality of expressions among this remote island population.

Jak Vauthrin is another of the leading disciples of Fathy. He established ADAUA (Association for the Development of an African Urbanism and Architecture), an institution that works primarily in Africa. The mission resembles that of DW, although perhaps with stronger emphasis on the development of local capabilities. ADAUA established branches in Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Senegal. Vauthrin remained faithful to his mission and persevered, despite the change in name of his central organization to Mirhas and then FISA (International Foundation for Architectural Syntheses), and moves from Geneva to Seville.

ADAUA's most substantial urban intervention was to supply housing for a refugee population that moved out of their original settlements in Mauritania, due to drought, to Senegal's coastal town of Rosso. In the early 1980s, more than three hundred houses were built in brick, with particularly developed and very simple vaulting technology. Simple load-bearing brick walls formed a single square module as the basic room. The roof was derived from a construction technology of spiralling equidistant layers of bricks to form a dome. They based their solution on the abundant earth available in the area, transforming it into building materials and eventually forming expressive domed dwellings. Although outsiders admired the project for its simplicity and for local people's participation, the residents themselves did not like the houses. It has been suggested that the domed appearance reminded them of funerary structures, repelled them from living in them. Part of the resistance also stemmed from the fact that this innovative solution had been brought in by foreigners, even though it employed local resources. The similarity of this experience with Fathy's Gournia is compelling. Both are well-intentioned and good-will gestures that were prevented from fulfilling their goals because of pre-existing, complex cultural forces that emanated from within these local communities.

Under such circumstances, it is not easy to be successful. First of all, it is impossible to objectively select the criteria that define the term 'success'. Is the measure of success the number of houses provided for people? Is it people's acceptance of what has been offered to them? Or is it their own definition or

expectation of a lodging? Whatever the criteria may be, the critical issue at hand is the lack of understanding by local people for those who came to their assistance with good intentions and an open heart, bringing what they thought would be 'good' for them. Unfortunately, local suspicions and continual questioning of the innocent nature of this 'volunteer spirit' have led to the defeat of these projects.

Sustainability

Among the new environmental ethics of the twenty-first century, sustainability has emerged as one of the most important and internationally endorsed principles, especially in the world of architecture and in terms of appropriate building practices. Its international adoption means that it has now become a major criterion in the judgement of any architectural or planning practice, and has placed itself within the expectations of new policies set out by international organizations. Needless to say, vernacular architecture is the highest form of sustainable building, as it not only uses the most accessible materials, but also employs the widest available technologies.

Architectural theory, which encompasses all the factors that surround the art of building, is embedded within society and is passed on from one generation to the next by means of tradition. This is a cyclical period of sustention. It applies to dwellings as well as to religious or communal monuments. It is when these cycles of transmission of information or technology are broken by outside forces that tradition ceases to be active. Unfortunately, changes that ignore the complex nature of social and environmental forces yield inappropriate architecture.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, globalization has a forceful impact on every aspect of our lives. From music to food, and from lifestyles to architecture; there are no areas of our existence that have not been affected by global forces and values. While bringing convenience in living and communication, this globalization has a homogenising effect and threatens to reduce the meaning of the architecture and built environments we live in. Meaning naturally comes with cultural awareness and historical continuity. In order to combat the threat of homogenization, the issue of cultural appropriateness, advocated by Oliver and others, will have to be taken more seriously.

Awareness of the importance of the conservation of architectural heritage, especially in areas where haphazard urban and rural building in inexpensive materials has taken place, has been raised. In the last ten years or so, many decision-makers have realized that the cultural identity that they are proud of is clearly related to the architectural heritage that they have been losing. The carelessly condoned heritage, when destroyed, becomes an important priority for conservation. Unfortunately, in most cases, what has been selected for conservation are the physical shells of the traditions, i.e. the buildings, rather than the cultural values and practices underlying them.

In time, the followers of Hassan Fathy and Paul Oliver are destined to be successful. In a world where the scarcity of energy resources and synthetic materials is only likely to increase, their determination to make use of abundant

local resources and their desire to respect and engage with the complexities of cultures, historical contexts and the pressing needs of habitat, will most certainly give rise to the impressive, durable and socially conscious vernacular architecture that Fathy, Oliver and their followers hoped to realize.

Notes

- 1 Later, in 1977, Rudofsky revisited the subject as 'notes toward a natural history of architecture with special regard to those species that are traditionally neglected or downright ignored' (Rudofsky 1977).
- 2 Prior to Rudofsky and Oliver, there had been a vivid line of research on vernacular architecture. Among this work was a series of theses written at the Istanbul Technical University in the 1950s. However these works primarily focused on traditional, regional architecture in various cities such as Ankara, Diyarbakir, Konya, Erzurum and Kastamonu.
- 3 I only had access to the 1755 edition of *Essai* (1966). The references made to the 1753 edition of *Essai* are based on Herrmann (1962).
- 4 In 1972, Paul and Valerie Oliver, and Hassan Fathy visited the Middle East Technical University in Ankara as my guests. They enjoyed a field trip together, looking at the extraordinary rock cut vernacular architecture of the Central Anatolian region of Capadoccia.
- 5 Hassan Fathy's *magnum opus* is his *Architecture for the Poor* (1973), which was originally published as *Gourna: a tale of two villages*, Cairo, Ministry of Culture, 19 9. This book found its real meaning when translated into French (Fathy 1970).

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