

*This syllabus courtesy of the*

## Vernacular Architecture Forum Syllabus Exchange



*A collaborative project of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*  
**[www.vafweb.org/resources/syllabi.html](http://www.vafweb.org/resources/syllabi.html)**

---

**instructor:** Howard Davis  
**course title:** Vernacular Building: Past, Present and Future  
**institution:** University of Oregon  
**date offered:** Winter 2006

  

**posted date:** June 2008  
**stable URL:** [www.vafweb.org/resources/syllabi/davis1.pdf](http://www.vafweb.org/resources/syllabi/davis1.pdf)

---

*This document is provided for non-commercial, informational purposes only.*

Arch 434/534 • Vernacular Building • Winter 2006 • 3 credits • Howard Davis  
Tues, Thurs 12:00-1:20, 206 Lawrence  
Arch 434 CRN: 25333 Arch 534 CRN: 25334

# Vernacular building: past, present and future

*Note: Arch 434 satisfies the University of Oregon's multicultural requirement.*

**Vernacular buildings comprise 99% of the buildings of the world.** They are those buildings which spring from local custom and practice, that are usually not the result



of what we today consider to be mainstream architectural practice. They include the stone villages of the Alps, the pueblos of the American southwest, the subterranean courtyard houses of China, 19th century workers' housing in England, villages of the Greek islands, squatter settlements in South America and India, the suburbs of America.

**The fact that the vernacular is so ordinary and pervasive is itself a good reason to study it.** It also provides powerful insights into fundamental issues of architecture. Its study provides insights into architectural form and typology, the building process, the relationship between buildings and human activity, the connection of buildings to

geography, the ways in which material culture expresses social and cultural values.

This course uses a survey of various traditions of vernacular building as a means to understand theoretical frameworks dealing with the nature, diffusion and transformation of architectural type; the formal, functional and aesthetic content of vernacular building; the relationship between craft, the building process and the making of places; and the continuities between the vernacular and the professional world of architects.

**Particular emphasis will be given to the future of vernacular building, looking at modern processes of design and production which can make healthy buildings and environments in large numbers, suited to people's lives and fostering a future of cultural and environmental sustainability, for the growing cities and suburbs of the world.**

The approach to be taken, therefore, is not one in which vernacular architecture is seen as a "style", but in which it is seen as a means for a culture and the people within it to participate fully in the ongoing creation of their world.

This is a lecture/seminar, in which students are encouraged to participate. Three of the classes will be replaced by discussion sessions, in which the instructor will meet with smaller groups to encourage as much discussion as possible.



### Readings

A course reader will be available, and various books put on reserve in the AAA Library. These readings will include selections from among the following works, and others:

- Linda Clarke, *Building Capitalism*
- Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture*
- Howard Davis, *The Culture of Building*
- Paul Oliver, *Dwellings: The House across the World*
- Dell Upton, ed., *Common Places*
- Roxana Waterson, *The Living House*

**Student requirements/grading criteria** are as follows, in addition to lecture attendance and completion of the readings:

In-class midterm exam. 35%  
Class project. 45%  
Participation in discussion sessions 20%

**Tentative class schedule** follows. The actual schedule may vary somewhat depending on class discussion, etc.

#### *Week 1*

**Tuesday.** Introduction: basic ideas of vernacular building and building cultures

**Thursday.** Application of basic concepts to "primitive" building traditions; approaches to form and function in vernacular building. Type: configuration, meaning, and function.

#### *Week 2*

**Tuesday.** Courtyard buildings of the Mediterranean I (type and structure)

**Thursday.** Courtyard buildings of the Mediterranean II (urban formation and variation). Collective form and the idea of process.

#### *Week 3*

**Section time to be determined.**

DISCUSSION 1: Collective process and the vernacular

**Thursday.** India and Nepal: traditional villages and cities.

#### *Week 4*

**Tuesday.** Greece. The variety of Greek traditions; northern Greece hybrids.

**Thursday. MIDTERM EXAM.**

#### *Week 5*

**Tuesday.** The urban vernacular of Venice, Florence and Rome

**Thursday.** Wood traditions of eastern Europe and Scandinavia; the merchant's house of northern and eastern Europe

#### *Week 6*

**Tuesday.** Wood traditions of Japan: farmhouses and shophouses

**Thursday.** England and New England: villages and village buildings

#### *Week 7*

**Tuesday.** 18th and 19th century London, and the development of modern building practice

**Section time to be determined.**

DISCUSSION II: The culture of building.

#### *Week 8*

**Tuesday.** Form and process in the contemporary city.

**Thursday.** New ideas about vernacular process: contemporary projects in housing and settlements in developing countries. Initiatives in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, South Africa.

#### *Week 9*

**Tuesday.** New ideas about vernacular process: contemporary projects in housing and settlements in the developed world. Initiatives in Europe and North America.

**Section time to be determined.**

DISCUSSION: the architect's role in the development of contemporary vernacular building.

#### *Week 10*

ARCHITECTURE DEPARTMENT FINAL REVIEWS-  
-NO CLASS

#### *Week 11*

PROJECT PRESENTATIONS

Arch 434/534  
VERNACULAR BUILDING  
Winter 2003

Tentative schedule and reader

#### Week 1

**Tuesday, Jan. 7.** Introduction: basic ideas of vernacular building and building cultures

**Thursday, Jan. 9.** Application of basic concepts to "primitive" building traditions; approaches to form and function in vernacular building. Type: configuration, meaning, and function.

- Paul Oliver, *Dwellings*, pp. 128-152, "Living spaces." University of Texas Press, 1987
- Henri Lefebvre, "The everyday and everydayness," in Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, eds. *The Architecture of the Everyday*. Princeton Architectural Press, 1997, pp. 32-36
- Christopher Alexander, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. chapters 4 & 5, pp. 46-70, Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Roxana Waterson, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in Southeast Asia*, chapter 5, "Cosmologies"
- Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order*, unpublished manuscript, chapter 3, "The theory of centers," and chapter 7, "The awakening of space"

#### Week 2

**Tuesday.** Courtyard buildings of the Mediterranean I (type and structure)

**Thursday.** Courtyard buildings of the Mediterranean II (urban formation and variation). Collective form and the idea of process.

- Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order*, "Structure-preserving transformations" and "Structure-preserving transformations in traditional towns"
- Jamel Akbar, *Crisis in the Built Environment: The Case of the Muslim City*. Chapter 6, "Elements of the traditional built environment." Concept Media, 1988, pp. 107-128.
- Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *A Street in Marrakech*, pp. 129-152. Anchor Books.

#### Week 3

**Section time to be determined.**

DISCUSSION 1: Collective process and the vernacular

**Thursday.** India and Nepal: traditional villages and cities.

- Robert I. Levy, *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal*, University of California press, 1990, chapter 7, "The symbolic organization of space," pp. 149-199.

#### Week 4

**Tuesday.** Greece. The variety of Greek traditions; northern Greece hybrids.

**Thursday.** The urban vernacular of Venice, Florence and Rome.

- Ron Walkey, "Order from experience, order from rule: the building guilds versus neo-classicism in 19th century Greece." unpublished ms.
- Richard Goy, *Venetian Vernacular Architecture: Traditional Housing in the Venetian Lagoon*. Chapter 8, "The city palazzo-fontego: its structure and appearance"

#### Week 5

**Tuesday. MIDTERM EXAM**

**Thursday.** Wood traditions of eastern Europe and Scandinavia; the merchant's house of northern and eastern Europe

- Jerri Holan, "Log detailing," in *Norwegian Wood*. N.Y., Rizzoli, 1990, pp. 147-175
- Christian Norberg-Schulz, "The domestic," in *Nightlands*, MIT Press, 1996, pp. 49-72.
- Philippe Contamine, "The peasant house" and "The urban house" in Georges Duby, ed., *A History of Private Life: Revelations of the Medieval World*. Harvard U.P., 1988

#### Week 6

**Tuesday.** Wood traditions of Japan: farmhouses and shophouses

**Thursday.** England and New England: villages and village buildings

- Susan B. Hanley, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan*. University of California Press, 1997. Chapter 2, "Housing and furnishings," pp. 25-50, and chapter 3, "A resource-efficient culture," pp. 51-76.
- Kenneth Frampton and Kunio Kudo, *Japanese Building Practice from Ancient Times to the Meiji Period*. Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1997.

- Chapter 1, "Typology, cosmology and construction methods," pp. 1-44.
- Thomas Hubka, "The Buildings and the Land," in *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*, University Press of New England.
- Carl R. Lounsbury, "The wild melody of steam: the mechanization of the manufacture of building materials, 1850-1890." In Catherine W. Bishir, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury and Ernest H. Wood III, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina: A History of the Practice of Building*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software*, Scribner, 2001. Chapter 2, "Street level," pp. 73-100; and Chapter 3, "The pattern match," pp. 101-129.

#### **Week 7**

**Tuesday.** 18th and 19th century London, and the development of modern building practice

**Section time to be determined.**

DISCUSSION II: The role of construction.

- George Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop*, chapter on "General work," Cambridge U.P. 1963.
- "Eighteenth century building conditions in and around London," in Linda Clarke, *Building Capitalism*, London and NY : Routledge, 1992, pp. 87-121
- Howard Davis, *The Culture of Building*, chapter 8, "Agreements, contracts and control"

#### **Week 8**

**Tuesday.** Form and process in the contemporary city.

**Thursday.** New ideas about vernacular process: contemporary projects in housing and settlements in developing countries. Initiatives in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, South Africa, Latin America.

- Howard Davis, *The Culture of Building*, chapter 10, "Shaping buildings and cities", pp. 219-240
- Howard Davis, *The Culture of Building*, chapter 11, "Postindustrial craftsmanship," pp. 245-268
- Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order*, volume 3, *A Vision of a Living World*, to be determined.

#### **Week 9**

**Tuesday.** New ideas about vernacular process: contemporary projects in housing and settlements in the developed world. Initiatives in Europe and North America.

**Section time to be determined.**

DISCUSSION: the role of the architect in the development of vernacular building.

- Mark C. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity*, University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 125-156, "Emerging complexity"