

This syllabus courtesy of the

Vernacular Architecture Forum Syllabus Exchange



A collaborative project of the Vernacular Architecture Forum
www.vafweb.org/resources/syllabi.html

instructor: Dell Upton
course title: American Vernacular Architecture
institution: University of Virginia
date offered: Fall 2002

posted date: June 2008
stable URL: www.vafweb.org/resources/syllabi/upton1.pdf

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

AR H 356/556 & ANTH 356. American Vernacular Architecture

Course meets Tuesday/Thursday, 11-12:15 in 153 Campbell Hall

Instructor: Dell Upton

Offices: 202 Brooks Hall and 111 Campbell Hall; hours Thursday 2-4 or by appointment; odd-numbered Thursdays in 202 Brooks, even-numbered Thursdays in 111 Campbell

E-mail: du2n@Virginia.edu (Please feel free to e-mail any questions or problems, but do not rely on e-mail for any urgent messages [e.g., news of illnesses preventing your fulfilling course obligations])

American Vernacular Architecture will introduce you to a variety of North American vernacular building traditions. This is a lecture course but not really a survey: it does not claim to cover systematically everything that might be called vernacular architecture. Instead, we will look at some length at several chunks of American vernacular architecture that have been extensively studied. They will help us to understand how people who are not academically trained as architects design and build, how buildings and landscapes are used, and what they mean to their builders and users.

In our initial meetings, we will examine the major vernacular building traditions of the rural United States (and to a lesser extent in Canada, Mexico, and those areas of the world from which builders emigrated to North America), considered as expressions of identity, organizers of social space, and conscious works of art. We will move region by region, focusing on European, African, and Native American traditions that shaped the most familiar and widespread folk house types, as well as the less familiar architectures of 19th- and 20th-century European and Asian immigrants.

In the second section of the course, we will pause to consider more closely some of the issues of ethnicity, identity, self-conception, and cultural synthesis raised in the first lectures. We'll look at three case studies of groups whose architecture and cultural landscape carried a significant burden of cultural identity: African Americans in the city and the country, urban Asian Americans (especially Chinese Americans), and the religious group the Mormons.

The remainder of the course will treat the vernacular landscape in commercial and industrial America. As folk traditions were transformed and reshaped, new kinds of vernacular environments were created in response to the new industrial/consumer society. In this section, as well, we will examine some aspects of the vernacular that are often overlooked, such as urban and commercial architecture, the public landscape, and spaces of work and of religion. At the end of the course, we'll direct our attention to the vernacular in the present day.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Regular attendance at lectures, and conscientious reading. Both are important, and the final examination will be based on both lectures and reading assignments.
2. A final examination. There are no slide identifications or other similar examination techniques in this course. The exam will be based on your ability to use the methods and concepts of the study of vernacular architecture and to apply them to the material presented in the course. There is no mid-term examination.

FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

1. A semester-long research project, based on a building of your choice **that you can visit and on which you can perform the following research** (including measuring), and divided into three parts, each of which should be about five pages long, not including visual documentation and footnotes and other apparatus:
 - a. A physical description of your building, emphasizing its present state and analyzing ways that it has changed through time. What were its original plan, exterior and interior covering, and decoration? How many stages of construction can you find? **What evidence did you use** to arrive at your conclusions? Illustrate with at least measured plans of every floor **based upon your own measurements**, and any other appropriate documentation in the form of other drawn views or photographs. If you have not drawn a plan before, you might want to consult, chapter 8 of Gabrielle M. Lanier and Bernard L. Herman, *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic: Looking at Buildings and Landscapes*, "Recording Historic Buildings." This section should be 3-5 pages long, not including visual documentation and footnotes and other apparatus. DUE Oct. 10.
 - b. An analysis of the use of space in your building, **based upon your own observation**. What is the relationship of architectural features and the type and arrangement of furnishings to the human activities that take place in the building and to the values (personal, cultural, professional/occupational, as appropriate) of the occupants? Is the space still used as originally intended? If not, what is different? Your written analysis should be accompanied by a schematic plan showing all interior features and furnishings. This section should be 3-5 pages long, not including visual documentation and footnotes and other apparatus. DUE October 31.

c. Finally, go to the documents to learn as much as you can about the history of your building. You should use all available public records, such as tax rolls, deeds, wills, building permits, and Sanborn maps, and any private documents (letters, historic photographs, family or organizational papers, for example) that might be available in public archives or from current or past owners. Your goal is to learn how to use these sources (not difficult, but takes a little practice) and to see what you can tell about the history of your building from these sources. For example, do changes in valuation or ownership give clues to when the building might have been built or enlarged (or reduced in size)? Use the information you gathered in all three sections, along with any secondary sources that may be appropriate, to offer an interpretation of the history and use of your building. This section should be 5-7 pages long, not including visual documentation and footnotes and other apparatus. DUE November 26.

Rules and advice about the term project: Given the scope of the project and the time available, you would do better to choose a small building, such as a house, rather than a large one, such as a dormitory or hotel. Do not choose a building you live in, have lived in, own, or are otherwise extremely familiar with already – the point of the project is to learn something. But do choose a building that you will be able to get to and get into several times over the course of the semester to measure, inspect, and photograph.

I have asked you to buy Barbara Howe, Dolores J. Fleming, et al., *Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History*. This is an excellent guide to all aspects of research on domestic structures and has extensive bibliographical annotations. With a little stretching, the advice here can be applied to other sorts of buildings as well, but you may also want to know that it is part of a series of books, the *Exploring Community History Series*, each of which has the subtitle *Exploring Their History*. Besides houses, there are volumes for farms, places of worship, local schools, and public places.

Another helpful work for finding tips on this sort of research is mentioned in (a) above: Gabrielle M. Lanier and Bernard L. Herman, *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic: Looking at Buildings and Landscapes*. This is particularly useful in being aimed specifically at this part of the country.

FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

A 15-20-page term paper on a topic of your choice that is related to the class material. The graduate paper is DUE November 26.

BOOKS TO BUY:

- Dell Upton, *America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups That Built America*
- Barbara J. Howe, Dolores A. Fleming, Emory L. Kemp, and Ruth Ann Overbeck, *Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History*

Structure and Reading List

Part I. American Folk Houses

WEEKS 1-6

The first section of the course examines the major vernacular building traditions of the rural United States (and to a lesser extent in Canada, Mexico, and those areas of the world from which builders emigrated to North America), considered as expressions of cultural identity, organizers of social space, and conscious works of art. The lectures are organized by region of the United States, focusing on European-, African-, and Native American traditions that shaped the most familiar and widespread folk house types, as well as the less familiar architectures of 19th- and 20th-century European and Asian immigrants. In every case, the emphasis is on cultural variations in responses to similar environmental conditions, and to the synthetic regional building traditions that arise from inter-ethnic and inter-racial contact.

Readings: (note: throughout the semester, it will be most helpful if you do the reading in the order it is presented in the syllabus.)

- Dell Upton, ed., *America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups That Built America* (1986) [to be read over the course of the first six weeks]
- Curtis C. Roseman, "The Changing Ethnic Map of the United States," in *Geographic Identities of Ethnic America: Race, Space, and Place* (2002), ed. Kate A. Berry & Martha L. Henderson
- Dell Upton, "The Origins of Chesapeake Architecture," in *3 Centuries of Maryland Architecture* (1982)
- Edward A. Chappell, "Acculturation in the Shenandoah Valley: Rhenish Houses of the Massanutten Settlement," in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (1986), ed. Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach
- Jay D. Edwards, "The Origins of Creole Architecture," *Winterthur Portfolio* 29 nos. 2-3 (1994)
- Rina Swentzell, "Conflicting Landscape Values: The Santa Clara Pueblo and Day School," *Places* 7 (1990)
- Stephen C. Jett, "Cultural Fusion in Native-American Folk Architecture: The Navajo Hogan," in *A Cultural Geography of North American Indians* (1987), ed. Thomas E. Ross & Tyrel G. Moore
- Joanna Stratton, ed., *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (1981): "Homes of Puncheon, Homes of Sod"
- Boyd C. Pratt, "Homesteading on the High Plains of New Mexico: An Architectural Perspective," *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review* 63 (1990)

- Alison K. Hoagland, “Russian Churches, American Houses, Aleut People: Converging Cultures in the Pribilof Islands, Alaska,” in *Images of an American Land: Vernacular Architecture in the Western United States* (1997), ed. Thomas Carter
- Yvonne Lockwood, “The Sauna: An Expression of Finnish-American Identity,” *Western Folklore* 36 (1977)
- Thomas Carter, “Traditional Design in an Industrial Age: Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Victorian Utah,” *Journal of American Folklore* 104 (1991)

➔ **Part 1 of your research project is due October 10.**

II. Architecture and Cultural Identity

WEEKS 7-9

In the second section of the course, we will pause to consider more closely some of the issues of ethnicity, cultural identity, self-conception, and cultural synthesis raised in the first lectures. We’ll look at three case studies of groups whose architecture and cultural landscape carried a significant burden of cultural identity: African Americans in the city and the country, urban Asian Americans (especially Chinese Americans) in the West, and the Mormons, a religious denomination who are sometimes described as a consciously self-created ethnic group and who were forced to confront ethnic differences among themselves in their early years.

- Dell Upton, “Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Invented Traditions,” *Historical Archaeology* 30 no. 2 (1996)
- Richard Westmacott, “Pattern and Practice in Traditional African-American Gardens in Rural Georgia,” *Landscape Journal* 10 (1991)
- Catherine W. Bishir, “Black Builders in Antebellum North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 61 (1984)
- Jeff Gillenkirk & James Motlow, *Bitter Melon: Stories from the Last Rural Chinese Town in America* (1987): “Wong Yow”
- Paul Groth, “Zones for Single Laborers: Skid Row and Chinatown,” in *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (1994)
- Rickey Lynn Hendricks, “Landmark Architecture for a Polygamous Family: the Brigham Young Domicile, Salt Lake City, Utah,” *Public Historian* 11 (1989)

III. Living and Working in Industrial America

WEEKS 9-14

The remainder of the course will treat the vernacular landscape in commercial and industrial America. As folk traditions were transformed and reshaped, new kinds of vernacular environments were created in response to the new industrial/consumer society. This section begins with discussion of the transformation of the vernacular domestic landscape from the folk traditions discussed at the beginning of the course.

- Rebecca Sample Bernstein and Carolyn Torma, “Exploring the Role of Women in the Creation of Vernacular Architecture,” in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IV* (1991), ed. Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman
- Angel Kwolek-Folland, “Gender as a Category of Analysis in Vernacular Architecture Studies” in *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture V* (1995), ed. Elizabeth Collins Cromley & Carter L. Hudgins
- Annmarie Adams, “The Eichler Home: Intention and Experience in Postwar Suburbia,” in *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture V* (1995), ed. Elizabeth Collins Cromley & Carter L. Hudgins (1995)
- Dana Oswald, “The Organization of Space in Residential Building: A Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Method and Theory for Activity Area Research: An Ethnoarchaeological Approach* (1987), ed. Susan Kent

➔ Part 2 of your research project is due October 31.

Then, we move outside the home, to consider landscapes of industry, in which employers often exploited ethnic differences to create discordant work settings.

- Lindy Biggs, *The Rational Factory: Architecture, Technology, and Work in America's Age of Mass Production* (1996), chap. 1
- Brent Glass, “Southern Mill Hills: Design in a ‘Public’ Place,” in *Carolina Dwelling: Towards Preservation of Place* (1978), ed. Doug Swaim

Next, we look at the city, focusing on the ways that people read one another in encounters on the street, then moving on to pay particular attention to the marking of difference in the urban landscape.

- Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (1946), chap. 14, “Bronzeville”
- Robert Stepto, “Washington Park,” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (1994), ed. Geneviève Fabre & Robert O’Meally
- Alice Gray Read, “Making a House a Home in a Philadelphia Neighborhood,” in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture II* (1986), ed. Camille Wells

- Joseph Sciorra, “‘I Feel Like I’m in My Country’: Puerto Rican Casitas in New York City,” *Drama Review* 34/4 (winter 1990): 156-68
- Christopher A. Airriess, “Creating Vietnamese Landscapes and Places in New Orleans,” in *Geographic Identities of Ethnic America: Race, Space, and Place* (2002), ed. Kate A. Berry & Martha L. Henderson

Then we turn our attention to the landscapes of religion, asking about varying definitions of sacred space and the settings created for them, ranging from Navajo sacred landscapes through camp meetings and religious buildings to cemeteries and other sites of commemoration.

- Michel Leiris, “The Sacred in Everyday Life,” in *The College of Sociology* (1988), ed. Denis Hillier
- Richard H. Jackson & Roger Henrie, “Perception of Sacred Space,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 3 (1983)
- Klara Bonsack Kelley and Harris Francis, *Navajo Sacred Places* (1994), 187-204
- James R. Curtis, “Miami’s Little Havana: Yard Shrines, Cult Religion, and Landscape,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 1 (1980)
- Joseph Sciorra, “Multivocality and Vernacular Architecture: The Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Rosebank, Staten Island,” in *Studies in Italian American Folklore* (1993), ed. Luisa Del Guidice

➔ Part 3 of your research project is due December 3.

➔ Graduate paper due December 3.

In the final week of the course, we consider the vernacular in the present day, particularly roadside and popular architecture, and reexamine the concept of the vernacular.

- Richard Longstreth, “The Diffusion of the Community Shopping Center Concept During the Interwar Decades,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56 no. 3 (Sept. 1997)
- Timothy Davis, “The Miracle Mile Revisited: Recycling, Renovation, and Simulation,” in *Exploring Everyday Landscapes* (Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, VII) (1997), ed. Annmarie Adams and Sally McMurry