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► **To cite this version:**

Hubert Guillaud. Socio-cultural sustainability in vernacular architecture. Versus: heritage for tomorrow, Firenze University Press, pp.48-55, 2014, 978-88-6655-741-8. hal-01159772

HAL Id: hal-01159772

<https://hal.science/hal-01159772>

Submitted on 4 Sep 2020

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Socio-cultural sustainability in vernacular architecture

Hubert Guillaud

CRAterre-ENSAG, Grenoble, France

“Housing should also be the space of good life, which embodies material well-being but must also include [...] a system of mutual assistance and solidarity, at the scale of the block of flats or of the city”. **Edgar Morin (2011, p. 197)**

Architecture is a social and cultural reality

This text by Edgar Morin makes us think about what housing should be if it was to reclaim the dimensions of material and immaterial values and if it was to contribute to generating more social cohesion in the space we live in. Lessons learnt from vernacular architectures put us back at the centre of this issue, through their legacy of social and cultural significance. Today, with an increasingly global society that tends to trivialize culture, is there not a space for recreating social bonds and for turning our social and cultural differences into a wealth of significance to be reintegrated into the production of our habitats?

The question of sustainable habitat in such a new global world, through the prism of social and human sciences, and according to spatial approaches suggested by researchers such as Alberto Magnaghi (the local project) or Augustin Berque and his studies of *human milieu*, his *écoumène*¹, and his *poetics of living*, encourages us to re-establish the anthropological and social dimensions of habitat. Moreover, and as pointed out by Jean-Paul Loubes (2010, p. 24), “we should reintroduce in housing the dimensions which were evacuated by functionalism (...): the symbolic and cultural dimensions (...). Cultural in the sense that architecture and the city are cultural realities, ‘artefacts’. Housing should be ‘situated’, in other words localised and informed by place. This information cannot be limited to the impact of geophysical or climatic factors. It should also draw on social and cultural dimensions that nourish the richness of significance of our habitat, by valorising housing cultures, place, and being in the world. For it is the ‘essences’ as defined by Merleau-Ponty, and the *Lebenswelt* as defined by Husserl, that we search for in the lessons we

learn from vernacular architecture – this ‘architecture without architects’ (Rudofsky, 1964) that is humanity’s common good which we have inherited and which expresses the widest social and cultural diversity anchored in the specificities of territories. This renewed interest in vernacular architecture may then reflect the rebirth of a desire of reconciliation with the material and immaterial values and with forms of expressions of the Beautiful, the Good, the Genuine that we feel when looking at the homes of ancestors that were so harmoniously integrated in the landscape as a geographic and cultural space and as the mirror of man’s history and life. A connected, non-arrogant, peaceful, human-scale architecture, that fits into sites, topographies, mineral and vegetal environments. An architecture which accounts for the diversity of cultures and economies. An architecture which reflects the knowledge and ‘know-how’, the ‘building cultures’ that have been passed on from one generation to the next, by anonymous builders, masters of an art of building that developed in the margins of scholarly construction and architecture, borrowing from or owing it very little – if anything.

In *La maison rustique*, Jean Cuisinier (1991) quotes these few words from Eugène Viollet-le-Duc’s book on modern housing: “if any work of man reflects the state of a civilization, it is housing, for sure”. In similar vein, Pierre Frey (2010, p. 22) argues that “architecture reflects the state and values of a society”. It is this social and cultural dimension of civilization, which is embodied in vernacular architecture, that we are interested in, at a time when this architecture is analysed in order to produce a sustainable contemporary architecture which would reintegrate the power of genius loci Christian Norberg Schultz referred to. A new vernacular architecture which would reunite drawing and building, the pencil that draws and the hand that builds, the space that is designed and the way it is used.

¹The word *écoumène* refers to human-made environments, lived in and used by man.



Fig. 1 Culture landscape of terracing in Les Beaumettes, France (photo: S. Moriset).

Free thinking on the sociocultural meaning of vernacular architecture

The meaning of vernacular architecture is both ordinary (for it is popular) and extraordinary because of its many qualities. Here, this meaning is revisited through the prism of some social, cultural, geographic, anthropological, architectural and building-related codes. The fact that we are increasingly mobile from a spatial point of view (work, holidays, travel) means that we are inevitably in contact with architectural heritage, whether it be vernacular architecture in the countryside or historic buildings in the cities. From an emotional point of view, we often associate a dimension of beauty with these buildings, since they are a testimony of the past, traces in our memories that enrich the way we consider the world. It is 'our' heritage and common good, a 'collective good' that belongs to a social group, to a region, to a nation, and even beyond, with the development of international cultural tourism. There is often a risk that this built heritage will end up in ruins, that it will be destroyed and will disappear. This collective bond means that we are 'all' invited to safeguard it in order to pass it onto future generations. This collective responsibility is increasingly compromised as heritage falls within the remit of the history of man, of spaces, of art, of architecture, of aesthetics,

of sciences and techniques. This means that analysing it is very complex, particularly from social and cultural points of view.

Renewed interest for vernacular architecture is based on the motivation of enlightened people who authored many regional monographs on 'peasant architecture' and of non-profit associations that worked for its inventory and conservation. This commitment was tangible in the middle of the 20th Century². In the past few decades, these studies, which were mostly functionalist and typo-morphological in their approach, opened up to anthropological and ethnological analyses which embodied the social and cultural dimensions of built heritage. Today, this infatuation with vernacular architecture seems once again to be nourished by society's attachment to peasant cultures, of which the richness of expression has been widely brought to light by the dissemination of published studies and by ethnographic or museological actions that have ascribed renewed value to the history of the peasant world. The global world also seems to revive the desire to take root in the cultural identities of territories, in the context of a dissatisfaction fuelled by the mediocrity of housing design since

² The study of the French rural architecture corpus was initiated during the Second World War. It is said this was to 'keep architects busy' during those dark times.



Fig. 2 Cultural landscape of vineyards, Chignin, Rhone-Alps, France (photo: S. Moriset).

the thirty year boom period that occurred between 1945 and 1975, a tendency which is perceived as generating trivialization and dehumanization in housing as many projects of that time – designated in France under the appellation of *grands ensembles* – have shown, several of which have been recently destroyed.

In the past few years, the mobility of populations between cities and rural areas has increased and has contributed to the spread of detached housing and to the restoration or refurbishment of part of the vernacular building stock³. These interventions are sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, and reflect a wide scale socio-cultural movement. Some have referred to a 'back to the land' trend found amongst *neo-rural*⁴ populations moving to rural areas that had lost their social, economic and cultural roots and part of their density. This trend is supported by local elected members since it contributes to the development of local economies (and in particular of tourism)

³ Sabattini, B. 2008: A report published in 2006 by the Economic and Social Council stated that of the 6 million rural buildings that remained in France (there were 11 million of them in 1966), only 1, 5 million had changed use and had been converted into main or secondary residences or rural guest houses and many others were falling into ruins.

⁴ Ibid. Between 1999 and 2004, over two million French people left urban areas, and moved to communes with fewer than 2000 inhabitants.

and to the preservation of cultural identity. It can also be seen as a will to preserve the traces of history, associated with the quest for social and cultural values of which the meaning has dwindled in the face of a world that is increasingly dominated by economic and financial interests. Moreover, the work crisis generates unemployment, tensions and stress, and as a consequence of this people are increasingly unable to buy a home in urban areas due to the price of land and building, and are thus seeking other solutions in rural areas. This movement is also generated by a quest for peace, calm and slowness, as a reaction to hasty lifestyles that cause health problems. This need to seek refuge appears to be linked with the strength of vernacular architecture and with its 'noble', natural and ecological materials, as opposed to industrial materials and other low quality artefacts found on the dominant market and that are built according to the principles of planned obsolescence. Compared with housing that appears to be fragile, degradable and built for one generation, vernacular architecture proclaims the reassuring evidence of its sturdiness, and of its environmental sustainability – an increasingly widespread preoccupation.

Recognizing the 'intelligence' of vernacular architecture is a way of paying tribute to the capacity of successive generations of builders



Fig. 3 Traditional granary, Soajo, Norte, Portugal (photo: M. Correia).

Fig. 4 Restoration of a traditional masonry roof, Nonza, Upper-Corsica, France (photo: N. Sánchez).

Fig. 5 Building a rammed earth wall; Alentejo, Portugal (photo: M. Correia).



to adapt to the diversity of environments, to overcome constraints, to make best use of available resources. It is a way of recognizing the ‘meaning’ rendered by this architecture that has been at the basis of a surprising cultural and social creativity developed and transmitted by craftsmen, bricklayers, carpenters and others, but also and above all by the inhabitants themselves – anonymous builders. This architecture is spatially anchored in territories shaped by man, where nature, space, society and culture intertwine to generate shapes that are perceived to be those of happiness. Its meaning is also strengthened by its relation with uses and exchanges, and encourages new types of relationships between inhabitants and their physical, social, cultural and economic environment, thus expressing a need for renewed social cohesion to allow new forms of creative sociability and improved community life to emerge.

Socio-cultural lessons learned from vernacular architecture

Our European vernacular architecture embodies tangible as well as intangible values that are a testimony to mankind’s capability of adaptation in its living contexts, and of its deep respect of nature, whatever the specific features of its environment are. Nature and culture, identity of the local society, ability for creating the best living conditions as far as possible, knowledge and know-how, are intimately linked. All this constitutes a socio-cultural heritage of great importance that offers us today inspiring lessons. Several major aspects of these lessons can be raised:

- Vernacular built heritage is part of the space of cultural landscapes which have been shaped by man, whether by peasants or craftsmen, prior to the industrial era which changed the course of history. More than the built objects themselves, it is the entire space of cultural landscapes which also gives a patrimonial value to flora (forests, various wood varieties), fauna, and to the landscaping made for specific cultivation in wide valleys, wine-making terraces or fields separated by walls. Water is also an element of cultural value. It has often been domesticated through canals and ponds inland, or salt marshes, dikes and ports along the coast line. Vernacular architecture and cultural landscapes are one and the same space which links nature and culture and which must be conserved and passed on to future generations (fig. 1-2).



SOCIO-CULTURAL PRINCIPLES *The habitat helps to preserve and transfer inherited values.*

- Vernacular architecture is a testimony of the knowledge and know-how of craftsmen or anonymous builders who erected it. These 'traces' of vernacular building cultures live in the landscape through the visual aspect of materials, earth, stone, wood, plants, farmhouses and outbuildings (barns, stables, washhouses, dovecotes), roofs, building and decoration details, relationships between buildings and their surroundings (paths, ponds, streams). All these elements demonstrate man's capacity to adapt to a place, to meet their needs and to address the social and cultural identity of territories (fig. 3). The transmission of all these dimen-

sions of the vernacular heritage and its reinvention is a challenge for the future (fig. 4-5).

- Vernacular architecture expresses a surprising creativity which reflects a high degree of collective intelligence and a process of building experimentation that gradually turned into experience. This social and cultural heritage demonstrates a high level of ingenuity in terms of adapting to resources and using them wisely. It takes many forms, that are useful, creative, aesthetic (coloured coatings, frescos, plantations) and artistic. These expressions of creativity should be an inspiration for tomorrow (fig. 6-7).

Fig. 6 Recognize the intangible values; Rennes, Bretagne, France (photo: E. Sevillano).



Fig. 7 Symbolic representation; Montsoreau, Loire River, France (photo: E. Sevillano).





- The social and cultural dimensions of vernacular architecture are also reflected in a building language which expresses the immaterial values of those who built and lived in the space. This collective memory expresses place attachment, shown by the varied forms of sacredness (religious or agnostic, myths and legends), expressions of symbolism and identity associated with the construction systems, apotropaic protection devices. These values are also expressed in collective rites or in intimate spaces (awnings, galleries, courtyards, gardens) that are pleasant to live in (fig. 8-9).
- More than the mere architecture of buildings, the vernacular human settlements, hamlets and villages, reflect inhabitant's desire and capacity to exchange and live together, and to maintain the conditions of social cohesion so as to live as peacefully as possible despite conflicts of interest. This is shown by washhouses and fountains, squares and covered markets where markets are found, frontages embellished through the use of flower planters, galleries and awnings that offer shaded spaces that can be shared and other spaces that can be used collectively for revelries. This community intelligence must be favoured in the built environment of the future, through squares, covered markets, fountains, etc. (fig. 9-10-11).



Fig. 8 Intangible values; stele of devotion at Annot, Hautes-Alpes, France (photo: E. Sevillano).

Fig. 9 Wash-house and public fountain at Vergons, Hautes-Alpes, France (photo: S. Moriset).

Fig. 10 Places for social activities; Les Marches, Rhône-Alpes, France (photo: S. Moriset).



Fig. 11 Central square in Vila Nova de Cerveira, Portugal (photo: L. Dipasquale).

