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# Defining vernacular architecture

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According to the etymological approach and to the Historical Dictionary of the French Language (Robert, 1985), the notion of vernacular architecture refers to the house of verna, which in Latin means 'slave born in the house', while vernaculus means 'indigenous', or 'domestic'. This definition is derived from Roman law, codified in the fourth century by Emperor Theodosius the Great (347-395). Quoting Ivan Illich (2005), Pierre Frey (2010, p. 13) reminds us that the 'vernacular kind' means "Everything that was crafted, woven or reared at home and not for sale, but for domestic use. Therefore, what is 'vernacular' has no market value. By extension, this definition includes the architecture of a territory and/or a human group, or of an ethnic group, who lives there. Vernacular architecture commonly uses local materials (AA.VV., 1993, p. 4).

This is a 'contextualised' architecture which belongs to a particular 'country' or to a regional/geographical area, and which was built for a given time. This architecture emerging from the 'genius loci' is the sense of the 'being of the place' and of the 'being to the place' as noted by Christian Norberg-Schulz (1981).

The term 'vernacular architecture' in use (last half of the twentieth

century) is derived from the English and arises as a reference to the work of prominent figures such as Bernard Rudofsky (1964), Eric Mercer (1975)<sup>1</sup> and Paul Oliver (1997). It most commonly refers to 'traditional' or 'popular' architecture, as opposed to 'scholarly' architecture. From a theoretical point of view, Paul Oliver (Ibid.) refers to Rudofsky in his definition of vernacular architecture and retains the notion of popular architecture, architecture without architects, or even 'people's' architecture (Oliver, 2003), expression of an "indigenous science of construction" (Oliver, 2006). This contrasts with 'learned' architecture that is produced by "trustees of the Art of Building", individuals, trades or institutions that break away from the contingencies of place as mentioned by Jean-Paul Loubes (2000, p. 40-41). One seminal definition given by Eric Mercer in the introduction to his study of English vernacular houses (Ibid.) focuses on the concept of shared type with regard to the number of buildings, on a geographical area and for a given time. Lastly, in this brief definition, we cannot ignore the importance of the anthropological and cultural parameters to which Amos Rapoport (1969) gave so much importance in his definition of vernacular architecture.

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<sup>1</sup> Mercer, E. 1975, *English Vernacular Houses. A Study of Traditional Farmhouses and Cottages*, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London. "Vernacular buildings are those which belong to a type that is common in a given area at a given time. It follows that a kind of building may at any one time be 'vernacular' in one area, and 'non-vernacular' in another and in any one area may change in the course of time from 'non-vernacular' to 'vernacular'. In other words, no building is or is not vernacular for its own qualities but is so by virtue of those which it shares with many others, and the identification of vernacular buildings is very much a matter of relative numbers" (Introduction).