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TRAINING WITH CRAFTSPEOPLE AND MAINTENANCE OF TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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The loss of know-how is a disaster for the preservation of vernacular architecture and the intelligence it carries. Centuries of accumulated experience in building with local materials are being wasted. Where vernacular architecture is still practised, the informal transmission of knowledge from father to son or from craftspeople to apprentice is rapidly dying. Knowledge transfer is a prerequisite to ensure that the best possible conservation practices are implemented and that contemporary designers understand the materials and techniques of the past in order to be able to propose reinterpretations adapted to present-day realities.

Learning by doing

For the knowledge of vernacular architecture to be effectively transmitted, a practical approach is necessary. In the context of heritage conservation education, learning by doing is a basic requirement. Specialised conservation-architects often go through internships on conservation sites where they are able to understand the manual dimension of the trade by practising alongside experienced craftspeople: earth masons, stone carvers or carpenters. This is rarely the case for architects or engineers who can obtain their diploma without ever having worked on a site or met with craftspeople. The consequence of this overly theoretical training in architecture is that contemporary designs are sometimes fraught with constructive inconsistencies, inadequacy with the tools and knowledge available in the construction area or unsuitability for the climate. In areas where vernacular architecture is still alive, designers and craftspeople are the same people. By mastering the use of locally available materials, they hold the keys to good design that will not cause hassle at the site. They know the tricks of the trade, they know which spans are possible between walls, which elements need to be reinforced to resist climatic hazards and which mistakes must be avoided. In this way, they design in anticipation of the realities of short-term construction and long-term maintenance.

Getting students to do site work

The architecture educators who have participated in the *VerSus* and *VerSus+* programmes are well aware of this essential link to the building site. They all organise site sessions or festivals where students and craftspeople come together and work hand in hand to exchange knowledge. Students who are lucky enough to go through these practical learning phases come out better equipped to produce architecture that is resolutely contemporary, although inspired by the constructive intelligence of the past.

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**Realisation of a thatched roof
in Kilwa, Tanzania**
(credits: author)



Co-design of the roof

An architect working with a carpenter on the design of the thatched roof

(credits: author)



Working with traditional knowledge provides the inspiration to define new codes that architecture is seeking to be more sustainable.

Combining the intelligence of the designer with that of the craftspeople

The renowned architects of today, such as the Austrian Anna Heringer, the Burkinabe Francis Kéré and the Chinese Wang Shu and Liu Wenyu, are comfortable with this relationship with materials. Their architectural production appeals to the common sense of vernacular architecture and values local craftspeople. They pay homage to the intelligence accumulated over the centuries, passed down through generations of craftspeople who have refined their practices by repeating the same gestures. These visionary designers are admired by new generations of architects and demonstrate that heritage can be the root for their creativity.

Another remarkable dimension of vernacular architecture is the care taken in implementing the work, as well as the quality of the decorations and construction details. This is due to the enthusiasm of the craftspeople in their work. In vernacular architecture, many details take shape at the very moment of construction. They have not been thought out in advance or drawn precisely before construction. One of the pleasures of the craftspeople is to be able to interact with the materials and adapt to the way they react, to create with their hands. This possibility of improvisation is theirs. This freedom may seem confusing to the architect who wants to draw up his plans down to the last detail. The academic world teaches architects to be the thinking heads who hand over their drawings to the docile craftspeople who must execute them. The architect must concede this margin of creativity in his projects and accept a random dimension at the time of construction. He must be able to delegate some of his ideas to other talents. Materials such as stone or earth permit a great deal of freedom. As they are not standardised, they are intuitive and stimulate originality. Allowing the people on the site to be creative gives them pleasure in their work. By enjoying their work, these people bring more care and intelligence to what they do. Creativity comes from this sharing of trust between designers and craftspeople, which adds up the intelligences instead of confronting them.

Designers who are attracted to traditional materials and techniques but lack experience on the building site need to work with experienced craftspeople to design realistic details that will not lead to complications in the implementation phase. A designer who has not experienced the intimacy of a material to feel how it works and how it reacts is not in a position to propose wise designs. It is absolutely necessary for him to dialogue and experiment with the craftspeople in the design phase to avoid pitfalls. This is often the case on contemporary earth construction sites, for example, where sample walls are erected to check the feasibility of proposed details.

Training and education of craftspeople

A good craftsperson is an autonomous person who has acquired sufficient technical maturity through repeated construction practice. It is always difficult for a practising craftsperson to stop work and learn a completely new material. He has neither the time nor the financial resources. Subsidised on-site training courses lasting from a few days to a maximum of one week are a good format for them. They are also great forms of knowledge transfer because the learners receive as much knowledge from the training instructors as from the other craftspeople present.

Political support and legal constraints

The revitalisation of craft skills must be supported by legal and political frameworks which require, or at least encourage, the use of local materials, implemented according to ancestral techniques. For example, the obligation to cover roofs with stone slates, as in the Aosta Valley in Italy, in turn creates a need for specialised labour and simplifies the setting up of appropriate training courses.

Many European national parks working to conserve their architectural values are setting up such mechanisms combining financial aid and legal frameworks. They also organise free training courses open to craftsmen as well as to the general public in order to give them the possibility to test vernacular techniques under the supervision of experts. This helps unskilled people to overcome their fears of facing an unknown material. The Livradois-Forez Park in France has taken such an approach to encourage good practice in rammed earth rehabilitation and construction. Their website provides technical documentation (a book, technical sheets, exhibition panels) abundant in information and examples that make people want to take good care of their earthen structures (www.pise-livradois-forez.org). It should be noted that another potential support to the sector from local authorities is the dissemination of directories of vernacular craftspeople who have received skills certificates.

To conclude on this question of training craftspeople and maintaining traditional knowledge, let us say that the man of the art (the architect) and the man of the trade (the craftsperson) must know how to combine their talents to conceive clever projects. The best builders in vernacular architecture are often the designers of their own work. Most contemporary architects working with natural materials are also excellent craftspeople, with both backgrounds. They thus combine the two forms of thinking,



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**Building of the thatched roof,
 Tanzania**
 (credits: author)

that of the designer, who shapes the space and models the materials through his culture, and that of the builder, who implements them in a rational and meticulous manner. This fusion of designer and crafts-person has always existed in vernacular architecture, or what Bernard Rudofsky calls “architecture without architects”, where the designer builds what he has imagined and ensures the stability of his work over time. This is the case, for example, of the master masons in Timbuktu in Mali, who are responsible for the maintenance of the houses they design and build for life. It is understandable that they cannot afford to make mistakes, either in design or in construction, to avoid overburdening themselves with work during their lifetime. We need to build on these models that have proven themselves over time to allow architects to use their hands as much as their brains in their curricula.

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