

How Can We Build Again in Beautiful Places?

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The Dilemma

The question is often asked when confronting the great places "What do we do about the fact that one simply cannot build anything in this landscape anymore?" There should be little doubt that the primary reason for this condition is the track record of architects over the past half-century. Once, good buildings could be pulled down and everyone had confidence that better buildings would be built in their places. Unfortunately, those expectations changed between the end of WWI and WWII. The modern preservation movement sprang up precisely because the exchange rate had become so predictably negative: new buildings were almost always perceived to be of less value than what they replaced in the view of the average citizen.

What is the solution? There may be several, but the most reliable usually begins with the study of the last model that worked. In other words, what were the last places built that were most-loved by the average citizen? The Most-Loved Places around the world almost always strongly based on to the vernacular architecture of their regions. In most cases, they actually define the vernacular architecture of their regions. Yet the architecture of the past century has largely refused to recognize this connection. As a result, the means and methods of the creation of places today are largely divorced from those that created the Most-Loved Places. This dilemma generates several questions: First, what specifically is the Vernacular Mechanism and how did it once work? Is it actually possible to do re-fire the engines of the Vernacular Mechanism? Is it likely that it will be worth the cost of re-establishing the

traditions? Finally, if the rebirth of the vernacular is possible and desirable, can it become the organic process that once again allows the creation of landscapes such as what we see around Pienza?



The Vernacular Mechanism Foundation Principles



The path toward tradition begins with something that resonates enough with the average citizen that they want to repeat it on their house or in their town. Repeated enough over time, it becomes a pattern, and then a tradition. The Most-Loved Places are therefore all by definition traditional places, and traditions are therefore by definition those things most worthy of love.

Traditional architecture occurs on a matrix anchored by the classical on the high end and the vernacular on the low. There is a horizontal cross-axis into the romantic. This article focuses on the classical and the vernacular.

The Vernacular

The vernacular was a widespread culture of general architectural knowledge that told the average person how to build a front door, a back porch, or a sunny garden spot. The Vernacular Mechanism produced the great majority of buildings ever constructed by the human species, and did so in almost every case without the need for architects. It met basic human habitational needs such as shelter from a storm and a quiet place to teach the children. It also provided basic human habitational delights such as the glow of embers off the hearth late on a winter evening, or the cooling breezes you feel sitting on the porch of a sideyard house in Charleston. Because the Vernacular Mechanism addressed the issues of commodity, firmness, and delight in a very simple, straightforward, localized manner, the architecture it produced was firmly tied to the climate, topography, materials, culture, and other particulars of its region. In other words, vernacular architecture often looked very different from place to place but was created by the exact same process worldwide.



The Classical

The classical system, in contrast, dealt with human needs of a higher order. Just as individual humans would feel unfulfilled with only a warm bed, good food and other basic necessities of life, the community at large also needs more from its architecture. Humans have always had a great need to know who and where they are and to be in harmony with their surroundings. Classical architecture told us who we were by doing things as simple as reflecting the human form in both its vertical arrangement (head, body and feet) and its horizontal arrangement (fixed bilateral symmetry at the face; variable symmetry elsewhere). Classical architecture also told us who and where we were on a higher level by telling the stories both of our culture's ancient origins and its more recent history. The classical put us in harmony with our surroundings using basic principles of proportion that had been understood for millennia and that are at the heart of music and many of the proportions of nature. Finally, the classical also told the story of a culture's aspirations for a brighter future.

Classical architecture was always performed by a trained hand due to the refinement of the story that was being told.



Neither the Vernacular Mechanism nor the classical system worked in the absence of the other. The classical system was based largely on a slow distillation of vernacular architecture. It took the noblest manifestations of the vernacular and refined them into a highly idealized form. The vernacular, on the other hand, was also informed by the classical. Simple vernacular farmhouses often were arranged to reflect some of the plainer classical patterns. Each fed off the other to create the Most-Loved Places.

Characteristics of the Vernacular Mechanism

The need to re-institute the principles and practices of the architecture of the Classical/Vernacular Spectrum is obvious. Classical architecture is already undergoing a rebirth that goes back to the 1980's. The vernacular, however, is still in deep hibernation. The processes that underlie it are only now beginning to be understood, and they need to be downloaded to the majority of the population of a culture to really re-fire the engines of the Vernacular Mechanism. But it will be worth it because the stakes are so high: this process can be responsible for the vast majority of all houses built. So what are the characteristics of the Vernacular Mechanism?



The first characteristic is that the process works with a set of patterns held by a culture at large. It requires everyone involved to act as generalists in the design and construction of their homes. They must know the general framework and the details of enough vernacular patterns to build a competent vernacular house.

The second characteristic is that patterns are passed down from generation to generation. This means that they must be capable of being communicated to the next generation. The patterns must therefore be clear and rational. If so, then they are relatively immune to destruction by a new generation's inevitable question of "But why? ..."

The third characteristic is that patterns are modified in an evolutionary utilitarian fashion. Old patterns that are no longer needed are simply discarded, like archaic words in a spoken language. Read any example of sixteenth-century English to discover how many words fall from usage over time. New patterns arise to meet new realities, just as the words "bandwidth", "hypertext", and "internet" have arisen in recent times.

Capabilities of the Vernacular Mechanism

What must any new Vernacular Mechanism accomplish? Because it will be charged with the responsibility for the vast majority of construction, it must be eminently repeatable. To be repeatable, it must embody the following three capabilities:

First, it must be able to be easily perceived. If the majority of the population is expected to understand and employ the patterns, they simply cannot be difficult to figure out.

Second, the patterns must be able to be easily loved. Things that are easily loved get repeated the most, and become the patterns that make up the Most-Loved Places.

Third, the patterns must be able to be easily executed. Only the most-loved things that can be built easily with relatively low-skilled labor are really repeatable and capable of forming a tradition.

The Six Realms of Architecture



Patterns in architecture are much like words in a spoken language. A single pattern is simply an architectural artifact that is repeated over time. Entire vocabularies of patterns, when combined with rules of usage, create styles, or pattern languages. For convenience and clarity, they are arranged into six categories according to the extent of their influence.

Every pattern begins as a new idea of a single person. Built enough under the influence of that person, it becomes a pattern of the First Realm, which are the Personal Patterns. Repeated enough by the fellow-citizens of the creator, it becomes a pattern of the Second Realm, which are the Local Particulars. Loved enough by those within the regional culture where it developed, it enters the Third Realm, which is the Regional Dialect. If it is adopted by the nation as a whole, it becomes a pattern of the Fourth Realm, which is the National Language. Patterns are occasionally elevated to the level of the Fifth Realm, which is the Continental Heritage. Some forms of expression, such as a smile or a laugh, transcend words and are considered to be universal. Such patterns are those of the Sixth Realm, which are Universal Patterns.

The First Realm: Personal Patterns



Personal Patterns exist at the font of personal creativity, and as such, are entirely unpredictable and not disposed to being characterized. Because the Modernism of the past century demands that each great architect create their own language of architecture, the vast majority of Modernist patterns exist within the First Realm.

The Second Realm: The Local Particulars



Localized patterns develop that come to have great meaning for that particular place. Sometimes, local patterns develop as a result of geography. The sea breezes, the salty dampness, and the views in small seaside communities of a century ago were all strong forces that would render inland architectural patterns ineffectual.

Today, unfortunately, local patterns rarely exist. Part of this is a result of the pervasiveness of factory-built components that may be shipped anywhere, but the philosophical beginnings of the reason are found in the International Style of the early Modernists, who promoted a style meant to be used anywhere with no regard for local traditions. This attitude has permeated much of Modernism ever since, creating a disregard for local patterns that is all too common amongst mainstream architects. Patterns of the second realm, when they exist, fall most often into the following categories:

1. Patterns that reinforce the local Transect of urban to rural.
2. Patterns shaped by a powerful local large-scale geographic feature, such as the shape of the peninsula on which Charleston is built.
3. Patterns that develop to deal with unusual smaller-scale locally repetitive geographic features such as caves, ledges, etc.
4. Patterns that develop to deal with unusual locally repetitive topographical features such as the hills of San Francisco.
5. Patterns that occasionally develop to reinforce the reading of the local Classical/Vernacular spectrum.
6. Patterns that occasionally develop locally to reinforce the reading of a building's degree of importance or humility.

The Third Realm: The Regional Dialect



Architectural dialects develop in response to regional climates and available building materials. American colonial structures in the New England states were often built out of plentiful hardwood, whereas brick became the material of choice farther south. They were both Georgian at heart, but the character of each was strikingly different.

For example, the northern most colonies of the United States dealt with the problem of harsh winters by pulling all the fireplaces into one great brick chimney in the center of the home. Houses in the South that were too small to include separate kitchen structures usually had chimneys that were pulled out as far as possible, often disengaging from the wall just above the firebox. Most of the ecological patterns reside in the Third Realm, which includes the following categories:

1. Patterns that reflect the naturally available materials of the region.
2. Patterns that either invite or deflect the heat of the sun as necessary.
3. Patterns that either invite or deflect prevailing winds as necessary.
4. Patterns that reflect the prevailing precipitation and humidity of the region and its many effects.
5. Patterns that support craft skill sets particular to the region.
6. Patterns that develop as a result of regional culture.

The Fourth Realm: The National Language



Just as a nation has its own distinct spoken language, it also has a distinct architectural language. Drive from one nation to another in Europe or any other continent, and notice how quickly the character of the buildings changes once you cross a national border. Most nations have built up very detailed languages of architectural patterns over the centuries.

These architectural patterns play the same part in an architectural pattern language as words do in a spoken language. They have been handed down from generation to generation, constituting the collected architectural wisdom of the culture to which they belonged.

Patterns, for example, determine how you create a front door, or a porch, or a sunny garden spot. Patterns within the Second Realm fall most often into the following categories:

1. Patterns that communicate the origins of the culture in which they are found.
2. Patterns that communicate the more recent history of the culture in which they are found.
3. Patterns that communicate the aspirations and values of the culture in which they are found.
4. Patterns that communicate the hierarchy of a town (relative importance of the buildings).
5. Patterns that communicate the building type (a school ought to look like a school, etc.).
6. Patterns that communicate the use of the building (where is the front door, etc.)

The Fifth Realm: The Continental Heritage



Nations of a single continent seldom share the same architectural language, but they often have a common heritage. Continental Heritage patterns may span more than a single continent based on migration patterns. For example, North and South America both share Continental Heritage patterns with Europe. Most of the patterns of Western Classicism reside in the Fifth Realm, which is the highest level of refinement of any architectural pattern. Fifth Realm patterns include the following categories:

1. Patterns of formal frameworks within which elements may be arranged.
2. Patterns of elements to be formally arranged (the classical orders).
3. Patterns of relationships of one element to the next.
4. Patterns of proportional relationships within an element.
5. Patterns of surface enrichments of elements.
6. Patterns of sculptural enrichments distinct from the basic structural framework of the building.

The Sixth Realm: The Universal



Some patterns in architecture have occurred throughout time and around the globe to such a degree that they obviously address deep and abiding needs in the human heart and mind. The collection of the universal patterns of architecture fall most often into one of the following general categories, and which may inhabit the entire Classical/Vernacular Spectrum:

1. Patterns that reflect the unalterable natural laws of gravity & thermodynamics.
2. Patterns embodying the basic harmonies of nature and as describable by mathematics and geometry.
3. Patterns embodying the proportions of appropriate parts of the human body.
4. Patterns that reflect the base-shaft-cap (feet-body-head) vertical arrangement of the human body.
5. Patterns that reflect the bilateral symmetry of the human face and the variable symmetry of the rest of the body.
6. Patterns that naturally provide basic human comforts associated with light, sound, temperature and humidity.

Pattern Graduation

Patterns, as inferred above, may graduate upwards from realm to realm when they resonate beyond their current realm. The Charleston Single House (or Charleston Sideyard, as it is known to the rest of the world) is a great example. A quarter-century ago, this pattern was selected by Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company for use in Seaside, Florida, some 400 miles away from Charleston. Since that time, it has resonated with town founders throughout the southeastern United States, who have adopted it for nearly a decade into their developments. More recently, town founders in other parts of the country have recognized that it makes sense to adopt the pattern for their climate, too, since it's not too dissimilar. As a result, a pattern has graduated upwards from the Second Realm to the Third to the Fourth Realm, all within the period of about one generation.

It is interesting to note that First Realm (Personal) patterns cannot be considered to have a life of their own, because if their creator dies, they also die. It is only when patterns graduate from the First Realm to the Second Realm (Local Particulars) that they may be said to have attained a life of their own, because they can then live on without their creator. Patterns

continue to graduate upwards to the limits of their vigor, occasionally reaching as high as the Fifth Realm of the Continental by the sculptor Callimachus.

An Objective Measure of Value

Pattern Graduation leads to a number of instructive observations, the greatest of which is probably an objective measure of value. Patterns spread because they resonate with people. They resonate with people because they do something good for them. Therefore, the patterns that spread the widest do exponentially more good as they spread because they not only are reaching more people, but are demonstrably resonating more strongly with each person as they spread. This objective measure of good is almost analogous to the spread of biological species, where the more vigorous and well-adapted species spread further and persist longer.



The Transmission Device

The characteristics, the abilities and the switches of the Vernacular Mechanism have all been understood to varying degrees for some time. What has been missing is any substantive understanding of the Transmission Device, which is the means of transmitting the wisdom both to new adherents and to subsequent generations. What was it that transmitted enough wisdom to entirely untrained designers (the common citizen) who were more often than not illiterate to create places of such great beauty with none of the advantages we enjoy? (mortgages, power tools, the Internet, etc.) Without a functioning Transmission Device to deliver the initial wisdom to millions in any newly-initiated culture, the Mechanism remains just an inert theory that sounds great but does not change the way we build. The Transmission Device, therefore, has been somewhat of a holy grail of the vernacular.

I now believe that the Transmission Device has been found. Some expected for years that when it was finally found, the Transmission Device would be some sort of mystical thing somewhat akin to the reputed connection between the First Americans and the land. In reality, it is something much simpler, or so it appears at this point.

The Device is necessarily exceptionally simple. It was, after all, used to transmit wisdom from generation to (often illiterate) generation in verbal fashion. It could not be so complex

as to require great intellect; it probably was not complex enough to require any more than simple drawings, if even that. I believe the Mechanism is embodied in four simple words:

"We do this because..."



"We" implies, of course, that this is collectively-held wisdom, available to an entire subculture. "Do" obviously implies action... the vernacular is something that is done, rather than being something that is merely thought about or debated. It is eminently practical and pragmatic. The vernacular embodies commodity. "This" implies a particular solution; a particular pattern. "This" is firmness. "Because" implies several things. On the one hand, it is ultimately utilitarian... there is a reason for every pattern. On the other hand, "because" is delight, because it implies closure; completion; perfection. The "because" does not have to be mechanical, but can be something as simple as "...because it is beautiful".

So what does all this mean in the pragmatic world? "We do this because..." is the perfect pattern preface because it implies the temporality of all patterns. If stated in a convincing verbal fashion, any average citizen can gauge the usefulness of any pattern based on the needs of his or her time and place. In other words, if the usefulness of a particular pattern has passed, then anyone can see it. The pattern can be laid to rest like "thee" and "thou." New patterns may arise in response to new needs, and if sold convincingly enough, they will thrive and join the lexicon of the patterns of a particular region or place. In other words, "We do this because..." is the ultimate regulating device of any living language, because it puts the regulation of that language back into the hands of the average citizen. And in doing so, vernacular architecture becomes the only truly modern architecture.



The Cost of the Vernacular

Is it likely that it will be worth the cost of re-establishing the vernacular? What actually is the cost of the vernacular? The combination of our modern specialist culture and the Modernist myth of the architect as genius/hero who holds his secrets close destroyed the traditional system of architecture nearly a century ago. Re-firing the engines of the Vernacular Mechanism would appear to involve re-enabling some of the conditions under which it once thrived. It is unreasonable to assume that it would thrive again in the very same atmosphere on which it choked.

Architects, by virtue of their myths, have made themselves irrelevant to the average citizen, so their myths have done all the damage they are likely to do at the vernacular level. What remains is the pervasiveness of today's specialist culture. The cost of the rebirth of the vernacular, then, is for the specialists to decide to devote at least some of their time and efforts to generalist knowledge and activities rather than remaining totally immersed in their specialties. Will enough of the specialists be willing for this condition to re-fire the engines? Before answering that question, a few aspects of traditional culture should be considered:



Generalists in the Traditional Culture

The traditional culture, as noted, is a culture that lives by spreading wisdom (traditions) broadly among an entire culture, rather than holding it with only a select few. By spreading wisdom broadly, the traditional makes generalists of everyone. Those immersed in a culture guided by this process, for example, once knew how to raise their vegetables, how to hunt for their meat, how to build their own houses, how to make their own clothes, how to make or harvest their own medicine, and possessed basic information about most of the physical operations of the world around them. Our specialist-dominated society asks only that each of us become very good at a very limited set of knowledge, then trade our services based on this information for money which we in turn trade for things created by other specialists. The general wisdom, therefore, has been all but lost.

Specialists in the Traditional Culture

Specialists existed in traditional societies, to be sure, but their roles were noticeably different than those of specialists today. Cultures obviously cannot advance much beyond a subsistence level if everyone is a hunter/gatherer. The more advanced traditional cultures made specialists of those with special talents or intellect. And even those specialists, because

they were immersed in a traditional culture, were not entirely unaware of the traditions. It is interesting to note that the specialist in the traditional culture often was a "generalists of specialization." The proverbial 'Renaissance Man' was expert at many things, not just one specialty.

Specialists in the Specialist Culture

Because the specialist culture has become so pervasive, the specialists are no longer the highly skilled individuals. Instead, everyone is a specialist. Some specialize in driving trucks. Others specialize in picking up trash. Others specialize in driving forklifts... the list goes on. These people could all perform their vocations and then plant their gardens, build their houses and sew their clothes (and a few of them still do), but the modern expectation is that we will all simply trade time for money and money for things.

Innovation



Innovation in a traditional culture begins with a single person's great idea, just like innovations in nearly any other system. That innovation originates, as often as not, with one of the specialists... one of the geniuses. But because the tradition is the property of the entire culture, each person is qualified to evaluate the idea and incorporate it into their work as they see fit. The geniuses, then, still fill an important role by pollinating their culture with great ideas, but they are not alone in that regard. Because wisdom is the property of millions rather than just the few, it is possible for any generalist to pollinate their culture with a great idea. Problems are therefore solved quicker and the resulting solution spread faster.



Is it worth it?

Specialist cultures have not been imposed as some sort of totalitarian regime upon an unsuspecting populace. We arrived where we are as a result of a string of choices that were made, all of which seemed to make sense at the time, beginning many years ago. Some even argue that the tide of history swells inexorably from the general to the specific. Clearly, the great achievements of the past century would have been impossible without specialists. Neither jet airplanes nor electron microscopes would ever have been developed in a culture populated only with subsistence farmers, of course. So by advocating for a vernacular system of architecture, do we become Luddites that call for nothing other than a simple agrarian existence?

Not at all. It should be possible for a single culture to support specialists that do the things that only specialists can do, while at the same time supporting vernacular systems that operate well without specialists. If six million people come this year to visit the Tuscan hill town of Pienza that was built by medieval farmers, then it clearly can be argued that specialists are not required to build places that bring great delight. Some may point out that the great Renaissance masters were without doubt specialists, but while they were clearly geniuses, they were also still part of a traditional system that spanned from the vernacular to the classical.



As a matter of fact, popular trends are answering this question for us. Look at the number of people in the US that are building pieces or sometimes all of their own houses. Home Depot and Lowe's aren't doing a booming business with conventional builders, but with homeowners. As a matter of fact, the builders don't even like these establishments most of the time because they are populated with people who aren't using builders. Look also at trends in health care, where increasing numbers of people are treating themselves with natural remedies rather than going to the doctor for every ache or scratch. Health food stores were considered by many people to be the province of "kooks" thirty years ago. Not anymore. Other aspects of culture are following.

New Urbanism is a perfect example. Here, an entire profession has been taken back in an amazing coup from city planners who were no longer planning and urban designers that weren't designing. And the victors were a rag-tag band of architects, lawyers, real estate agents, developers, and even a couple dentists thrown in for good measure who didn't have enough city planning degrees between them with which to burn and warm their hands 25 years ago outside the gates of the profession when they first laid siege to it.

So it can reasonably be inferred that the era of hyper-specialization may be ending, and that people may now be interested in taking more of their life back. If so, then this may be one of the easier sales jobs of all time: convincing people that they want what they're already telling us they want. Why don't we just skip the sales job and fire up the engines? Because if we

have really discovered the same Mechanism that allowed the creation of places like Pienza, is there really any question as to whether re-starting it is a noble and worthy objective?

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