

Columbia University
GSAPP, Architecture
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300S Buell Hall
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Modernism and the Vernacular 1900-Present
Regionalism, Tradition, Identity, and Resistance

“I notice that the most prudent and modest of our ancestors much preferred frugality and parsimony in building as in any other matter, public or private.”

—Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, 1443–52 (1485)

“Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common, was explored and poeticized. That which had been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts. The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign—is it not?—of new vigor when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 1832

“Taken all round, the barbaric and semi-civilised peoples have taken the lead over the cultured ones in the arts.”

—Gottfried Semper, on seeing the Great Exhibition, 1851

“They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”

—Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire,” 1852

[A vernacular building] “has not the simple majesty of Egyptian art, nor the sturdy strength and indestructible aspect of the Assyrian buildings, but it *speaks*; one feels that here every workman must have contributed his share of intelligence, and has left the imprint of his labour.”

—Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *The Habitations of Man*, 1875

“This simplicity is, perhaps, the principal attribute by which the Italian cottage attains the elevation of character we desired and expected. . . . [It] assumes, with the simplicity, *l’air noble* of buildings of a higher order; and, though it avoids all the ridiculous miniature mimicry of the palace, it discards the humbler attributes of the cottage. The ornament it assumes is dignified; no grinning faces, or unmeaning notched planks, but well-proportioned arches, or tastefully sculptured columns. While there is nothing about it unsuited to the humility of the inhabitant,

there is a general dignity to its air, which harmonizes beautifully with the nobility of the neighboring edifices, or the glory of the surrounding scenery.”

—John Ruskin, *The Poetry of Architecture*, 1837–38 (1873)

“The true basis for any serious study of the art of Architecture still lies in those indigenous, more humble buildings everywhere that art to architecture what folklore is to literature and folk song to music and which academic architects were seldom concerned. . . . These many folk structures are *of the soil*, natural. Though often slight, their virtue is intimately related to the environment and to the heart-life of the people. Functions are usually truthfully conceived and rendered invariably with natural feeling. Results are often beautiful and always instructive.”

“. . . Folk buildings growing in response to actual needs, fitted into environment by people who knew no better than to fit them to it with native feeling—buildings that grew as folk-lore and folk-song grew, are today for us better worthy of study than all the highly self-conscious academic attempts at the beautiful throughout all Europe.”

—Frank Lloyd Wright, Wasmuth portfolio, 1910

“The art of the peasant is a striking creation of aesthetic sensuality. If art elevates itself above the sciences, it is precisely because, in opposition to them, it stimulates sensuality and awakens profound echoes in the physical being. It gives to the body—to the animal—its fair share, and then upon this healthy base, conducive to the expansion of joy, it knows how to erect the most noble of pillars.

—Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*, 1911 (1965)

“Understand the primitive in life, then art will arise on the horizon.”

—Adolf Behne, “Kritik des Werkbundes,” 1917

“Do not build in a picturesque manner. Leave that kind of effects to the walls, the mountains, and the sun. A person who dresses picturesquely is not picturesque but a clown. Country folk do not dress picturesquely, but they are picturesque. . . . Do not think about the roof, but about rain and snow. That is how country folk think and why in the mountains they give their roofs the shallowist pitch their technical experience tells them is possible.”

—Adolf Loos, “Rules for Building in the Mountains,” 1913

“There is no such thing as primitive man: there are primitive resources. The idea is constant, in full sway from the beginning.”

—Le Corbusier, *Towards an Architecture*, 1923

“In the north German lowlands stands the house of the German farmer. His needs with respect to house, stable, and barn are all filled in this structure. All the pictures I have shown correspond in every way to the needs of the inhabitants. This is all we ask for ourselves. Only the means that are of our time.”

—Mies van der Rohe, “Solved Tasks,” lecture, Berlin Bund, 1923

“Architecture is the result of the state of mind of its time. We are facing an event in contemporary thought: an international event, which we didn’t realize ten years ago; the techniques, the problems raised, like the scientific means to solve them, are universal.

Nevertheless, there will be no confusion of regions: for climatic, geographic, topographical conditions, the currents of race and thousands of things still today unknown, will always guide solutions toward forms conditioned by them.”

—Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, 1930

“. . . observation of the modern movement, both abroad and at home, and a close study of these old Pennsylvania buildings will clearly show that the motives and ideals of both are the same. To perceive how sincerely these houses and farm buildings manifest their function, how perfectly they are adapted to site and how simply they are expressed in the best materials at hand is only to recall that these qualities are the identical ones exemplified by all the great architectural movements of the past.”

—Eleanor Raymond, *Early Domestic Architecture of Pennsylvania*, 1932

“That the type of men who are described as modern architects have the sincerest admiration and love for genuine national art, for old peasant houses and for the masterpieces of the great epochs in art, is a point which needs to be stressed. What interests us most when travelling, for instance, is to find places where the daily activity of the population has remained unchanged. Nothing is such a relief as to discover a creative craftsmanship that has been developed and handed down for generations from father to son, and that is free of the pretentious pomp and empty vanity of the architecture of the last century. Here is something from which we can learn, though not with a view to imitation.”

—Marcel Breuer, “Where do we stand?” 1934

“Forms taken by culture in scattered communities: “folk art.” Perfect harmony achieved on a scale with *man*. Serenity of the pastoral life. Tools and equipment sufficient though precarious. . . . But the locative is either on its way or already there. . . . Death of “folk art,” dawn of a new culture and accompanying distress.”

—Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City*, 1935

“Technically, modern architecture is mostly a discovery of the Nordic countries. Yet, spiritually, it is the “style-less” Mediterranean architecture which has influenced this new architecture. Modern architecture is a return to the pure, traditional forms of the Mediterranean. It is a victory of the Latin Sea.”

—José Luis Sert, “Raices mediterráneas de la arquitectura moderna,” 1935

“The relationship between technique and aesthetics is not new. It is a longstanding response to an ethical need for clarity and honesty, leading us to document relationships between past architectures, discussed in history books, and the fulfillment of the modest and humble buildings realized with a spirit of marvelous “primitiveness.” The present-day difficulties could be insurmountable if we accept the idea of a truly contemporary architecture, while refusing to recognize the most ingenious and primitive relationships at its source. This is a grave error. When the climatic conditions, the habits of everyday life, the economic conditions have not undergone significant changes, so too the characteristics of utilitarian buildings do not change

over time; when the construction process is interpreted as a tool, a consequence of instinctive and primordial logic, the same results can be obtained today.”

—Guiseppe Pagano, “Documenting Rural Architecture,” 1935

“[Ernst Bloch] say: ‘It is untrue that Expressionists were estranged from ordinary people by their overweening arrogance. Again, the opposite is the case. The *Blue Rider* imitated the stained glass at Murnau, and in fact was the first to open people’s eyes to this moving and uncanny folk art. In the same way, it focused attention on the drawings of children and prisoners, on the disturbing works of the mentally sick, and on primitive art.’ Such a view of popular art succeeds in confusing all the issues. Popular art does not imply an ideologically indiscriminate, ‘arty’ appreciation of ‘primitive’ by connoisseurs. Truly popular art has nothing in common with any of that. For if it did, any swank who collects stained glass or negro sculpture, any snob who celebrates insanity as the emancipation of mankind from the fetters of the mechanistic mind, could claim to be a champion of popular art.”

—Georg Lukacs, “Realism in the Balance,” 1938

“A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building: the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.”

—Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, 1942

“Any reflective man thrust into the unknown of architectural invention cannot base his creative spark on anything but the lessons taught by past ages, and the signposts time has left standing are of permanent human value. We might categorize our inheritance as folklore, an expression which connotes the flower of the creative spirit in the popular tradition, a tradition whose domain extends from the home of man to the dwellings of the gods themselves. . . . From my earliest days I have devoted myself to the study of folklore; so that much later I was able to apply all energy in intervening to save the fascinating Algerian Casbah from destruction (they wanted to raze it merely because it sheltered too many bad boys!).”

—Le Corbusier, *Talks with Students*, 1943

“[The world of ‘primitive man’] ‘is a world which has no development as we understand it. Change means a break in the established and reciprocal relationship between man and his environment, and would destroy the unity between man and his environment, and would destroy the unity between man and natural phenomena.’”

—Erwin Anton Gutkind, *Community and Environment*, 1953

“We realize that they [primitive civilizations] can teach us forms that can be used to express specific social, territorial, and spiritual conditions. From this our social imagination may be able to form an aesthetic unity.”

—Sigfried Giedion, “Aesthetics and the Human Habitat,” 1953

“Natural man did not precede society, nor is he outside of it.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1955

“Anonymous architecture can best be judged by its success or its failure to provide simple Aristotelian ‘Space as the Logical Condition for the existence of Bodies.’ . . . In utter contrast to architecture of academic origin, form in Anonymous Architecture is always the matrix of space. The result is a positive-negative volume interrelationship that is singular and unrepeatable. Each space need is enclosed with materials and forms that correspond precisely to unique, never quite duplicated conditions of site, climate and specific purpose.”

“There is no such thing as progress in residential architecture. . . . The purpose of living is strictly non-progressive.”

—Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, “Environment and Anonymous. . .,” 1955

“The traditional house is so strikingly modern because it contains perfect solutions, already centuries old, of problems which the contemporary western architect is still wrestling with today: complete flexibility of movable exterior and interior walls, changeability and multi-use of spaces, modular co-ordination of all the building parts, and prefabrication. . . . The flexibility of use of these component parts is so great that they satisfy the seemingly self-contradictory requirement of providing unity and diversity of form-expression at the same time. Such an achievement of continuity is always indicative of great depth and ramification of cultural development.”

—Walter Gropius, *Katsura*, 1960

“Vernacular architecture does not go through fashion cycles. It is nearly immutable, indeed, unimprovable, since it serves its purpose to perfection. As a rule, the origin of indigenous building forms and construction methods is lost in the distant past.”

—Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects*, 1964

“. . . to gain insight from the commonplace is nothing new: Fine art follows folk art. Romantic architects of the eighteenth century discovered an existing and conventional rustic architecture. Early Modern architects discovered an existing and conventional industrial vocabulary without much adaptation. . . . There is a perversity in the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. . . . This is a way of learning from everything.”

—Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1972

“Architects who can accept the lessons of primitive vernacular architecture, so easy to take in an exhibit like “Architecture without Architects,” and of industrial, vernacular architecture, so easy to adapt to an electronic and space vernacular as elaborate neo-Brutalist or neo-Constructivist megastructures, do not easily acknowledge the validity of the commercial vernacular.”

—Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1972

“To me, it became apparent that many of the aspects of so-called modern architecture, and one based on the needs and the demands of today, were extraordinary similar to the aspects of traditional Japanese architecture, especially as regards the dwelling. Today it is an acknowledged fact that the ancient principles which have guided traditional Japanese architecture are almost identical with those newly rediscovered by Western architects.

—Antonin Raymond, *An Autobiography*, 1973

“What is new about the New Brutalism among *Movements* is that it finds its closest affinities not in a past style, but in peasant dwelling forms, which have style and are stylish but never modish: a poetry without rhetoric. We see architecture as a direct statement of a way of life and in the past ordinary, prosaic life has been most succinctly, economically, tersely expressed in the peasant farms and the impedimenta of Mediterranean rural life that Le Corbusier had mad respectable.”

—Alison and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric*, 1974

“Primitive buildings have only the most marginal and superficial things to teach us, and that an excursion like this into architectural noble-savagery is just serendipity *à la mode*.”

—Reyner Banham, review *Architecture without Architects*, 1965

“For Euro-Americans, to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other.”

—Marianna Torgonick, *Gone Primitive*, 1990

“If modernity had its origins in reticulations of exchange and production encircling the world, then it was a creation not of the West but of an interaction between the West and non-West. The sites of this interaction were as likely to lie in the East Indies, the Ottoman Empire, or the Caribbean as in England, the Netherlands, or France.”

—Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity*, 2000.

“Vernacular sentiments, while not ‘modern’ in the orthodox sense, provided emotional means for dealing with the anomie caused by industrialization and urbanization. . . more typically, the vernacular was employed, consciously or inadvertently, as a corrective to modernity’s universalism.”

—Maiken Umbach and Bern-Rüdiger Hüppauf, *Vernacular Modernism*, 2005.

“His [Le Corbusier’s] logical and ever fresh mind offered India answers similar to those of any of the great Indian Shastries (architects) of the ancient and medieval times. . . . A expression and experience he created out of a few base elements, yet expressing a new vitality challenging the traditional as well as the modern. He made tangible from béton-brut, local stone, local crafts and exploited shadows, patterns, the breeze and the monsoon.”

—Balkrishna Doshi, 2011

“Stories of origin are far more telling of their time of telling than of the time they claim to tell.”

—Robin Evans

“The new era has only spread out a flashy veil over the old one, archaic impulses fester under the rouge of modernity.”

—Domenico Starnone, *Lacci*, 2014