



"[Vernacular architecture is] designed by an amateur without any training in design... paying little attention to what may be fashionable. The function of the building would be the dominant factor, aesthetic considerations, though present to some degree, being quite minimal. Local materials would be used as a matter of course".
 Ronald Brunskill
'Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture'

Zachary House © Stephen Atkinson

Haptic/Tacit: In Search of the Vernacular

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The term 'vernacular' is somewhat elastic but vernacular architecture essentially refers to buildings intended to meet local needs, using locally available materials and reflecting local traditions. Vernacular architecture therefore is a synthesis of local materials and local craft skills. It was traditionally an amateur undertaking (without any professional architects' input) and relied primarily on the specific abilities and flair of the local builders.

Vernacular buildings express a deep sense of belonging and are often lauded as a representation of national identity. Think of Ireland's low slung blackhouses, the characterful half-timbered houses of Germany's Black Forest, or the wind-battered tower houses of the Scottish Highlands. It is self-evident that this architecture has come into being through the patient application of craft and resonates as a showcase for the craftsman. Vernacular buildings may well forego the architect's trained eye; they rely, instead, on a diverse team of competent individuals including blacksmiths, stone masons, brick-makers, joiners, plasterers, painters, roofers and tilers. The tasks involved are myriad and might include cutting, carving, braising, assembling, shaping, casting, forming and trimming. The activities involved in the completion of a building can be complex but the construction process (the fusion of craft skills) can act as an antidote to the dehumanising drudgery of the working practices so prevalent in our post-industrial world.

The rise of globalisation and the systematic industrialisation of the

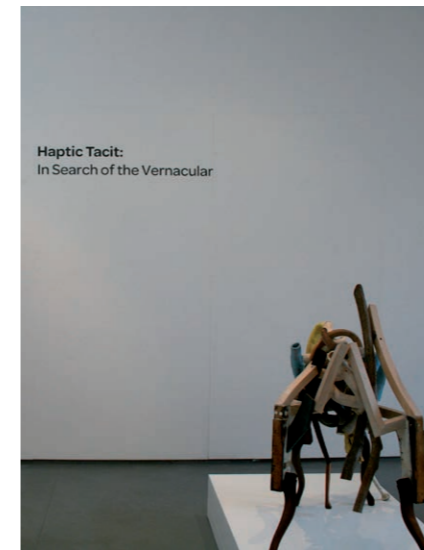
construction industry, however, sparked a sustained backlash and gave birth to the Conservation Movement which has championed preservation/restoration over demolition/reconstruction. Some cynics now denigrate the heritage industry as "a symptom of national decline, part of a top-down plot designed both to sanitize and anaesthetize the past". Admittedly, crumbly old buildings are often very fragile and can be expensive to maintain, but the failure of Modernism's promise of a 'Brave New World' and a growing desire to hold on to our historic structures has also helped revitalise indigenous craft skills. A new-found passion for 'authentic' architecture has generated considerable interest in neglected techniques such as stone tooling, brick making, lime washing and straw thatching. Of course, the term 'craft' can be mercurial and Tanya Harrod warns that: "Craft is a multivalent word, suggesting both the high seriousness of responsible artistic endeavour and whimsical self-expression."

In 'The Decorative Art of Today' (1925) the celebrated architect (and leading proponent of Modernism) Le Corbusier attacked attempts to plagiarise past forms in order to appeal to a mass market. He dismissed as vulgar the commercial replication and exploitation of indigenous cultural activities such as "Argentine tangos, Louisiana jazz, Russian embroidery, Breton wardrobes, faience from almost everywhere." He also wrote enthusiastically in 'The Four Routes' (1941) of the timeless values of vernacular architecture and championed its economical use of materials, its lack of superfluous decoration and its 'honesty' in construction.

Critics, however, began to question Le Corbusier's motives, and many became disillusioned with the Modernists' austere agenda. Society started to look for alternatives and fixed on Bernard Rudofsky's seminal book 'Architecture without Architects' (1964) to articulate a more humanist vision. He eschewed the rigid dogma promoted by Le Corbusier and his acolytes in favour of a vernacular architecture which would reconnect to some enduring fundamentals. Rudofsky's thesis was to abandon "fixed, homogenous, or totalising conceptual frameworks" and instead embrace a new moral wholesomeness. This more ethical approach would prioritise the creative use of indigenous materials and embody the noble virtue of chaste frugality. This was a communal architecture, "produced not by specialists but by the spontaneous and continuing activity of a whole people with a common heritage." In his book, 'Buildings without Architects', Anthony Reid argues that:

"Vernacular architecture is a subject that provides a window on the lives and traditions of the indigenous people of our world, and in doing so creates a mirror that reflects our own experiences. This, in turn, helps us to understand more clearly where the buildings of our contemporary world sprang from, and more importantly, why such buildings so often fail to meet our fundamental human needs."

Architecture's primary role, of course, is not only to provide shelter but also to articulate form in order to shape the experiences, events and actions within that space. The



Exhibition image featuring 'Density and Stillness' (2017) by Grant Aston. © Kim Norton

architect's ability to marshal the "correct, and magnificent play of masses brought together in light" therefore impacts on everyone's experiences and feelings. In Greek, αρχιτεκτονική (architecture) means the beginning of all arts and supports Bernard Tschumi's declaration that architecture is a "hybrid art".

Since the late 19th century, however, many professional architects have explored the notion of the vernacular as a distinct style. Ruskin, Pugin, Viollet-le-Duc and Morris are the original progenitors of this new ideology, and the Arts & Crafts movement proved a natural conduit for the refinement of this theoretical stance. Willy architects such as Voysey, Lethaby and Lutyens readily engaged with the vernacular because of its unpretentious beauty, romantic connotations and patently hand-crafted aesthetic. Today, many architects cultivate a more holistic approach which accommodates ethical and environmental concerns. This has spawned what Vicky Richardson has called the "New Vernacular" and although not a new style per se, it denotes a shift in attitude whereby indigenous culture becomes the "analogous inspiration" for exciting new work imbued with a heightened authenticity. The question is whether the New Vernacular has sufficient creativity and drive to counter the dominant trend towards a creeping homogenisation and 'global blandness'?

In exploring this 'new' vernacular, architects and artist/makers endeavour to synthesise both traditional and modern aspects of the construction process. Stephen Atkinson's reductivist Zachary House



Above and right: Kim Norton and Gail Mahon, 'Untethered' (2018). Soil on canvas, ceramic, wood, latex, flint, bone, jute.

(first built in 1995) in Louisiana, captured the imagination of many and garnered a plethora of international press coverage. Its compact form and seemingly naive design "pays respect to local historical house types of the Dogtrot and the Shotgun. Its use of vernacular materials and minimal detailing make it both an ode to local traditions while still retaining a universal character."

The ability to bridge local and global is reflected in the work of the six artist/makers featured in the 'Haptic/Tacit: In Search of the Vernacular' exhibition and offers a fresh perspective on the vernacular. For example, Jane Cairns' ceramics pursue an intimate connection to the city in their quest for "beauty in the ordinary", whilst David Gates' elongated structures challenge conventional notions of proportion, utility, scale and balance. The attention to detail and care taken with every interface is self-evident and is also discernible in Kim Norton's process-led work which endeavours to engage (and at times envelope) the viewer. By contrast, Gail Mahon favours tactile installations which speculate on notions of entropy and environmental decay. Henry Pim employs paper clay to create free-standing forms, somewhat akin to architectural models. The repetitive grid predominates and generates a lattice network with diagonal cross-bracing meshing with orthogonal elements. Grant Aston also works primarily in clay, but the results are wilfully organic and somewhat unsettling. His recent pieces combine familiar fragments (such as an elegantly turned cabriole chair leg or a sinuous mahogany armrest) which are then collaged with curvaceous clay forms. All six artist/makers share a common interest in the



body and architectural form, although the materials they employ vary. Each piece has been transformed through rolling, beating, firing, cutting and/or layering, dependent on their inherent properties, but a sense of experimentation and love of the tactile pervades the work on display.

It is telling that the United States of America has evolved a more expansive understanding and appreciation of vernacular architecture. They now consider virtually all building types (farmhouses, bungalows, sheds, churches, courthouses, barns, commercial buildings, etc.) from all historical periods to be classified as vernacular. Dell Upton asserts that "vernacular building is ordinary building" and promotes an interdisciplinary crossover of research interests (encompassing historians, folklorists, geographers and preservationists, etc.) so that our understanding of the vernacular is enhanced. He asserts that "knowing that there may be over a dozen legitimate ways to understand a house, a barn, or a town plan prevents the student from making the facile assumption that simple forms represent simple realities." This enlightened approach needs to be more widely disseminated if we are to reconnect to a more meaningful appreciation of the vernacular. Certainly this exhibition demonstrates considerable progress in our quest for a broader acceptance of the vernacular as being more than mere folksy kitsch. The work reflects an open-minded approach which not only oscillates between the primitive, the instinctual and the exotic but also signifies a buoyant eclecticism in contemporary craft practice.

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