NOTES ON THE ETHICS OF STUDYING VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

Scholarship on vernacular architecture typically constructs the identity of the vernacular subject in terms of a stable and holistic culture, rooted in place and community. On the other hand, the scholar of vernacular architecture is modern, claiming the attendant freedom to individually aspire regarding profession, lifestyle, culture and location. This paradox, although pervasive, is rarely explicitly recognised. This failure results in ethical conflicts that occur even with the best intentions of the scholar.

The paper focuses on this ethical dilemma, and argues that if it is not acknowledged it pushes us towards the unacceptable situation of an "either/or" choice: either suppress the modernist aspirations of the vernacular subject, or accept that culture and built heritage have an unstable relationship that reduces heritage to the superficiality of a visual setting, within a hierarchy of power that pushes vernacular culture to the margins.

The paper argues that the notions of "modernity" and "vernacular" have to be integrated into a framework that binds the scholar and vernacular subject into a common territory, without which it becomes difficult to ethically validate scholarly study of the vernacular. An outline of this framework is proposed.

Introduction

The study of vernacular architecture is a discipline with a relatively short history, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century with seminal milestones such as the exhibition "Architecture without Architects" put on at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by Bernard Rudofsky in 1964; and the publication of "Shelter and Society" (Oliver, 1969), and "House, Form and Culture" (Rapoport, 1969).

In its initial phase, study of vernacular architecture tended to focus on societies anchored within a relatively stable tradition; largely looking at rural peasant societies: a predisposition reflected in the seminal reference work "Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World" (Oliver, 1997). But the challenge has begun to shift in the last few years. We are now at a moment in history where an insidious form of globalisation, which can coordinate distant locations in real time, is severely challenging the sense of the local that sustains the very core of the vernacular. The discipline seems to be responding to this new circumstance, looking more at urban areas and seeking to study the forces and changes that vernacular design is facing. The theme of this ISVS conference, as well as the proceedings of the preceding one, seems to be recognising this new direction. At the last ISVS conference, close to half of the total number of papers presented focused on the (largely urban) developmental mutations that vernacular communities are undergoing; whereas a lesser number of papers were aimed at the traditional area of interest in holistic slow-change rural cultures. Given the relatively short history of the discipline, and the momentous scale of the contemporary challenge, it is appropriate at this moment in time to critically introspect on the study of vernacular architecture.

To do this we must be clear on what we mean when we say "vernacular architecture". Work being produced in this discipline of study echoes the definition articulated by Oliver (1997) as architecture that is owner built or community built; where even if specialised skills are utilised, these skills are locally based; and where the architecture has a fairly direct correspondence with the immediate local contexts of cultural and social tradition, climate, and material resources. This stands in contrast to an architecture produced by formally trained architects in a society occupationally differentiated to a level where the design process is abstracted and distanced from the routines and experiences of everyday life, often relying on a philosophy that is more conceptual and abstract than experiential.

Learning from Orientalism

If we are to critically introspect on our discipline we must look at the field in its entirety: recognising that a discipline is constituted both by the scholarship as well as its scholars. In this respect, there are striking lessons to be learned from the critique, albeit of a different field, articulated by Edward Said (2001) on Orientalism. It could be argued that for a long time the Orient was largely ignored by western scholars; and the fact that in the 19th century the Orient began attracting a significant level of scholarly attention could be

taken as an ethical acknowledgment of the Oriental subjects place in the work, thereby reversing earlier imperialist arrogance. However, Said argues that imperialist attitudes continued, because a careful reading of the texts shows the Orient to be characterised as an exotic other, to be read in contrast to a rational and progressive Occident. While the subject of scholarship was Oriental, the scholars were Occidental (along with a few eastern elites conditioned by western education and attitudes). The scholar may be acting with the best of intentions, and the exoticism of the Orient was often a subject of both admiration and desire. But by failing to acknowledge the comparative reading of east and west, the scholar (perhaps unwittingly) displays a patronising attitude, casting the Oriental subject as a primitive being who is not capable of speaking on his/her own condition. This denial occurs because the prerequisite of the discourse is that the way of knowing should be in rational intellectual terms. Any other way of knowing is set aside as myth and folklore, which do not qualify as the basis for any discourse. Thereby the Occidental scholar is required to speak on behalf of the Oriental subject: an attitude that formed the epistemological foundation of European colonialism.

There have been many critiques of Said's argument, and it is not necessary to go into them here as what is at stake is not the defensibility or correctness of his conclusions. What is of greater relevance to the study of vernacular architecture is Said's method where he recognises the discipline as one where both scholars and the subject of scholarship involve the lives of humans; the two inhabit worlds with strikingly different epistemologies; and

the failure to acknowledge this difference has profound ethical implications. In this respect the study of vernacular architecture is similar. Its subject matter is characterised as vernacular, but the scholars are far from vernacular, and would typically be characterised as "modern": a term often placed in opposition to "traditional".

Defining Modernity

The word "modern" means something that is pertaining to present or recent times and is not ancient or remote. But it is also a word that has a historical meaning, implying that humans have not always been modern and became modern only from a certain point in time. Some would date the beginning of this era to the Renaissance, but if one looks at it more specifically from the viewpoint of current attitudes its origins could be traced to that era in European history known as the Enlightenment, beginning (depending on which text you place as its origin) around the mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth century. This was not an era with a uniform philosophy and covered a range of (often contradictory) thoughts. But a common thread was a critical questioning of traditional institutions, customs and morals; replacing them with rational thought as the primary foundation for deriving the legitimacy of authority and judgment. This was a line of thought with profound moral consequences. If reason is the foundation, then it is one that is integrated with the inalienable and individual condition of birth (each one of us is born with the capacity to

think), and cannot be rooted in traditional custom.   This has in turn led to the birth of concepts we now consider as basic: human rights and democracy. Our notions of justice have been radically transformed. In earlier traditional societies there was little formalised legislation, and whatever mechanisms of justice existed were aimed more at the restitution of tradition rather than egalitarian ideals.   If pre-modern tradition placed a priority on the preservation of tradition and custom, modern ethics in contrast places faith in the ability of individual reason and thus prioritises the autonomy and consequent freedom of individual will.

This is not to argue that there is a clean split and that we have left the traditional era completely behind and are now in the modern; or that we either live traditional lives or modern lives.   Many of us go through a modernist education and choose careers based on modernist aspirations, but remain embedded in families with traditional customs and ideals, and often find ourselves in a delicate act trying to balance conflicting pressures. But this remains a private battle. When it comes to the public realm we have largely converted to modernists.

The institutional structures we create for governance, the delivery of justice and education, and settlement planning are founded on the ethical and epistemological premises of modernism.

Ethical Problems in Juxtaposing Vernacular Subjects and Modern Scholars

As scholars of vernacular architecture we are all modernists.   A glance at any reputed publication or conference on vernacular architecture shows that all the contributors are highly educated, with advanced professional degrees received from a modernist educational system.   Papers are peer reviewed and accepted on the quality of their intellectual rigour: a process premised on a standard of reasoned discourse in which the vernacular subject would find it close to impossible to participate. And most of us are following career paths that we believe should be determined largely by our individual interests and will, rather than being determined by an imperative to sustain communitarian structures. When we and the subjects we research belong to two different worlds, and we do not make concerted attempts to reconcile them into an integrated framework, several ethical problems arise.

The first is that we may be guilty of the same sin that the Orientalists are guilty of, as per Edward Said's critique.   We speak about people through a discourse in which the people we speak of cannot participate. And when we study the vernacular world without a simultaneous critical and comparative examination of the modern world, are we tacitly constructing the vernacular subject as that exotic other, interesting but primitive, standing in contrast to our erudite sophistication and therefore in need of our expert guidance to construct a future?

Then we have to examine why we choose to set up a discourse on the vernacular subject in which he/she cannot participate. Are we seeking to speak on behalf of the vernacular subject? If so, on what authority can we claim the right to speak on his/her behalf? Does the vernacular subject even desire someone to speak on his/her behalf?

Perhaps we could lay claim to the defence that we are not seeking to represent the vernacular subject, and only seek to acknowledge his/her (hitherto ignored) presence, architecture and value. But if we leave modernity out of the discussion, what are we tacitly postulating as the relationship that the vernacular subject has with modernity?

Let us first examine the vernacular rooted in long standing traditions. If we value such architecture, are we imposing any obligation on the vernacular subject to preserve such architecture? To do so would be tantamount to denying to him/her the modernist aspirations that all of us routinely claim: a denial that would be ethically indefensible. But if we say that we are granting full freedom to the vernacular subject to construct any aspiration he/she chooses, then we must confront the ethical implications of a set of competing forces in which we are (perhaps unwittingly) complicit. In the form of globalisation that we find ourselves in now, the modernist way of life is becoming increasingly intrusive to the kind of community based tradition that has sustained the vernacular; and it is becoming increasingly difficult to exercise a choice of isolating oneself within a long standing tradition. As modernist actors, we tacitly endorse the modernist ethics and way of life that is intruding on the vernacular, even though we work in a discipline that

seeks to value the vernacular. Are we destroying with one hand what we seek to preserve with the other? And given the isolation of our discourse from the vernacular world, are we taking on any responsibility of empowering any voice to the vernacular subject on this clash of conflicting forces?

We must also ask what this reveals about our ethical stand on the notion of built heritage. Clearly, as scholars of vernacular architecture, we seek to go beyond the limited notion of heritage as the preservation of ancient monuments, and our scholarship seeks to frame a living sense of heritage. This involves the connection between individual acts, community based acts, and a culture that is able to connect across more than one generation. Oliver (2006) has argued that a primary value in studying vernacular is the learning of how community values can be embodied in architecture. However, our scholarship of the vernacular can only record culture as it has already happened. We find it impossible to speak of a culture as it is happening in the real experiential sense of this very moment, or of one that we expect or wish to happen. And by participating in a modernist culture that values individual creativity over community creativity, and by failing to implicate that fact in our analysis of vernacular tradition, we wind up with our main conceptualisation of culture as one with our heads turned backwards in time. We lack the clues on how to adequately integrate our own current experiences into a sense of culture, or on how the notion of heritage can sustain any sense of continuity within the context of modern life. Heritage thus winds up being the product of a way of life and culture that cannot be located within modern life;

which reduces any modern notion of built heritage to the superficiality of a pleasing visual setting.

The study of vernacular architecture appears to be ethically problematic if modernity is not successfully integrated into the analysis. But what kind of integration should we aim for? Coming to the emerging urban vernacular, mere recognition of modernity is insufficient – for that is what has been done within recent trends in the discipline. The work of Tajudeen (2008), Shah (2008), Tarjoko (2008), Bose (2008) and many others at the 4th ISVS acknowledge, often with a strong sense of concern, the displacements forced on to vernacular architecture by urban modernity. But the intellectual analysis remains ambivalent regarding any idealistic aspiration that would guide a resolution of the emerging conflict. Even though it has been recognised that a dominant share of building stock in the world is produced by vernacular methods (Oliver, 2006), current scholarly analysis largely fails to pinpoint the conflict in the Cartesian attitudes of the modern settlement planner with the nuanced approach to space found in the vernacular: and given that our public realm is institutionalized in terms of modernist epistemology, this is a hierarchy of power weighted strongly in favour of the Cartesian planner.

In these absences, a narrow set of choices appear to remain, each deeply problematic: (a) a lament on the malaise of modernity that condemns us to an inevitable decline in culture, morals and art; (b) an anachronistic, often fundamentalist, impulse to cling to an established culture; (c) endorsement of a culture of anarchic hedonism within an individualistic society that seeks no higher ideals; or (d) accept a hierarchy of power that by definition pushes the vernacular to the margins (even though the vernacular constitute a majority of the world's population).

Redefining Modernity

Ultimately, if our discipline puts vernacular architecture under a lens, we must insert into the frame a mirror that directs the gaze back at us. For it is only by constructing a higher ethical ideal, which can guide both modernity and the vernacular, that we can ethically validate the study of vernacular architecture. To explicitly articulate such an ideal is beyond the scope of this paper, but some broad direction will be spelt out.

We cannot go back to an earlier ideal of deriving legitimacy and authority from wisdom received through established tradition. The belief in individual rights and freedom is too deeply established as an ethical tenet to permit this. But the early modernist hope of displacing tradition with reason has also reached a dead end; for it has been adequately argued over the last five decades that the philosopher's worldview of an abstract totalising knowledge is not possible – and where attempted has been deeply problematic. There are some, like Habermas (1984), who have argued that modernity is an unfinished project. Accepting the postmodern critique that there is no ultimate location of foundational meaning, and building on a direction first identified by Wittgenstein, he considers the site of rationality to be interpersonal linguistic

communication rather than a conceptualised structure of the world. Building on a structure of everyday discourse and pragmatics, he argues that a rational public sphere will emerge as only those interests that are generalisable will survive rational argumentation. Habermas has been critiqued for: (a) his assumption that a coherent public sphere will emerge, thereby not giving due recognition to pluralism and multi-culturalism; and (b) his optimistic assumption that every speech act has an ultimate goal of mutual understanding, thereby not giving due recognition to the play of power. However, the idea of founding modernity in everyday acts is an intriguing direction to explore, given our interest in the vernacular which is so integrated with everyday life.

Taylor (2003) extends this line of thought, but is not as ambitious as Habermas and does not seek a goal of defining a public sphere, focusing his interest on the more immediate question of personal identity and responsibility. He contextualises this question within the wider quest for authenticity. Like Habermas, Taylor locates the basis of reasoning in everyday speech acts, pointing out that authenticity can only be derived through dialogue. Just like language, the impulse to achieve it may be innate to the human condition, but it can only be realised by engagement with other human beings. But authenticity also has a moral dimension, rising above personal freedom and desire to define a higher beacon – that Taylor terms as a "horizon of significance" – of what we ought to desire. For example, if men and women are to be considered equal it is neither because of their visibly common attributes nor their differences, but because overriding these commonalities or differences are higher properties of value that define them both, such as the productive capacity for love, memory or recognition. Without a horizon of significance every choice becomes equal, whether it is one that is petty and self-gratifying or one that seeks a moral idealisticground.

There was a time when this quest for authenticity was handed down through received traditional wisdom. Now that that has eroded, one can no longer achieve it through convention and one has to dig deeper into a greater awareness of the present. Taylor analyses the implication of this on art, noting that in an earlier era creativity in art followed a principle of mimesis of reality using established languages, safely assuming in society the presence of widely held pre-existent beliefs. Now the work of art has to create its own world of references and make them believable. But this is not solely a degeneration into individualised idiosyncrasy. The work of art suggests a wider predicament in which all of us are embedded, and is emblematic of horizons of significance. Just because there is a subjectivity of manner does not mean there is a subjectivity of matter.

Connecting the Sacred and the Secular

Taylor's definition of horizons of significance lays the ground for a framework that unites the sacred and the secular. Smith (1992) raises the question of whether in a world of religious pluralism we can rise to the challenge of identifying a primordial tradition that underlies all religious traditions. Smith identifies three components of this tradition:

a) a recognition that reality is not at a single level but is at multiple levels, with the four commonly found levels being: (i) the terrestrial level of every day life; (ii) the intermediate level of dreams, emotions, ideas and archetypes; (iii) the celestial level where the divine is perceived but with (often human) form; and (iv) the infinite where the divine is recognised beyond form or attributes.

b) These different levels are not separate but are really different dimensions of the same universe.

c) These levels are not abstract constructs, and each level is experientially knowable.

One need not agree with Smith's categorisation of levels, or even profess to a belief in God. In recognising reality as being multi-leveled, we can connect with the notion of authenticity that Taylor has defined for us by which we find meaning in our life. But we can also recognise that in comparison to a lower level a higher level can impart an aura of sublime reverence, thereby admitting the sacred into our life without a compulsion to feel any contradiction with secular ideals.

Creating Spaces of Engagement

When we locate the foundation of modernity in dialogue rather than reason, we are admitting that culture is not an a priori phenomenon. It is an emergent phenomenon, deriving from everyday actions, where deliberated actions seek a wider horizon of significance.

In living emergent systems, pre-established overarching descriptions of the whole system can actually be an obstruction rather than of assistance. Johnson (2002), in his analysis of emergence, points out that the human brain is an emergent system that would cease to function if each neuron seeks to be individually sentient. Johnson argues that emergence is predicated on a rapid series of direct experiential engagement with the immediate context, along with an ability to recognise larger patterns in these sets of engagements. The recognition of larger patterns is then reified in material behaviour and construction: in the case of humans this reification would occur in art and artifacts (including architecture). This grounding in direct experience rather than intellectual abstraction is a facet of life that modernity has lost sight of. A unique capability of human beings is the capacity for reflexivity: we can think about ourselves, and in that act of thinking we wind up changing ourselves. Reflexivity is a double-edged sword. On the one hand the capacity to think beyond oneself creates the capacity to recognise and be moved by the transcendent (to construct horizons of significance). But on the other hand the same capacity allows us to disconnect our thinking from our experience and be trapped by abstraction. Without a grounding in

unselfconscious tacit experience, we can be diverted by a false and abstract sense of authenticity in our lives, cut off from the emotional connections that are essential for any sense of culture to emerge.

In this reframed sketch of modernity we find a fair amount of common ground with the vernacular, without any need to sacrifice modernity's ideal of the freedom and autonomy of the individual will. We locate the basis of life in everyday experiential dialogic acts that seek wider horizons of significance. We would also seek an architecture that is sympathetic to everyday experience while making connections with higher, wider and sacred realms. And this model would be predicated on a sense of culture that is always alive, rather than the coherent abstractions that much of contemporary scholarship directs our attention toward.

A significant implication that this ideal would demand is a shift of starting point, away from intellectual abstractions of life toward a conscious and critical construction of the spaces of engagement that would be conducive to the dialogue and quest for authenticity thatof scholarship involvItse the we must strive for. And the two kinds of spaces immediately relevant to our discipline are the spaces of design practice and academia. If the dialogue is to be rooted in grounded experience, and not be diverted by abstraction, we must start from the bottom up with the dialogue of our own local spaces, and work our way upwards to wider hierarchies of space. This ethic demands that each one of us critically examine the spaces of design practice and/or academia that we are personally involved in. We must ask what responsibility we have taken to promote a dialogic quest for significance within these spaces. Who are the stakeholders in this space who must be admitted into the dialogue? What are the propositional connections between this dialogue and the architecture we endorse? How do we seek to reify this quest? Only when we can all honestly say that we operate in such spaces of engagement can we say that we aspire to a modernity that does not contradict the vernacular.

Conclusion

To complete the circle, it is helpful to step away from modern philosophy for a moment, and examine a source of traditional wisdom: the Katha Upanishad [1]. This Upanishad tells the story of Nachiketa, a boy whose father piously seeks religious merit by sacrificing some possessions to the temple priest. Noting that the sacrifice includes a few old and feeble cows, Nachiketa wonders what the point is in sacrificing what is useless to start with, and challenges his father by asking "To whom will you give me?" Consumed by a flash of anger at this impertinence, the father impetuously retorts "I give thee to death!" Nachiketa, as a disciplined mind, accepts the consequences of his action whatever they may be and sets off for the abode of Yama, the God of Death. But when he arrives at his destination, he finds that Yama is not there. He patiently waits there for three days and nights. When Yama returns he is struck by the disciplined manner in which Nachiketa has waited in a place from which most people would fearfully flee. As a reward, he not only reprieves him from death, but also grants him three wishes. As his first wish, Nachiketa asks that his father's anger be appeased: and as his second wish asks to be instructed in the proper way to carry out the ritual of the fire sacrifice that will grant passage to heaven. Yama gladly and immediately fulfils these two wishes. But as his third wish, Nachiketa notes that when a man dies there is doubt as to whether he still exists or does not exist, and asks to be taught the truth that will dispel this doubt. Yama, realising he is being asked to reveal the secret of death, tries to divert Nachiketa from this wish, offering him all sorts of riches instead. Nachiketa steadfastly refuses all these temptations, on which Yama realises he is worthy of this question and decides to grant the wish. Yama uses the metaphor of a chariot, identifying the atman (a term translatable as both "self" and "soul") as the chariot's passenger, the physical body as the chariot itself, consciousness as the driver, the mind as the reins, the five senses as the horses pulling the chariot, and the objects perceived by the senses as the chariot's path. If one merely seeks earthly fulfillment, allowing a free rein to the senses and the mind, then the chariot runs a haphazard and unproductive path, rendering the atman and consciousness irrelevant. The Katha Upanishad introduces the term yoga: a discipline by which consciousness is trained to still the senses and mind, allowing the atman to become aware of itself and exercise its intention and potential. In this awareness, the unity of the atman with the Brahman – the creative life force of the universe that is beyond time and form – is realised: an awareness that reduces death to an insignificant moment within a larger cosmic context.

The Katha Upanishad, like the other Upanishads, reveals a message that rather than treating the world as a question to be examined or answered, it is more productive to turn a critical and rigorous gaze on the awareness of the observer. This message bears a striking resonance with the notion of a dialogic modernity that is premised on an ethical and critical awareness of one's own spaces of engagement. This self-awareness should make us realise that, if we wish to ethically validate our study of the vernacular, we have to reexamine our relationship with the world. It is insufficient to merely be in this

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[1] The Upanishads are a set of scriptural texts that are foundational to the monistic branch of Hinduism known as Vedanta. While they cannot be precisely dated, they are largely believed to range from the middle of the first millennium BC to the early medieval period. The Katha Upanishad is believed to be of the 5th century BC.

world and to revel in its pleasures. It is also insufficient to limit our aspirations to the level of studying, analysing and intellectually comprehending the world. It is necessary to examine our own lives and the spaces of engagement we construct, thereby recognising and accepting the ethical responsibility to uphold the world.

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