

Thinking Re-Vernacular Building

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All photographs by Marylee Mitcham.

This short reflection was inspired by experiences of building and thinking. In homage to thinking, it begins with a fugitive reading of Martin Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking." In homage to building it concludes with my story of constructing a house on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains in southern Colorado, the place that I would make home. Along the way, and in the references, homage is offered to a number of other inspirations for a recovery of what Christopher Alexander calls "the timeless way of building" but might also be termed the conscious vernacular.

As Stewart Brand has noted, after farming, building is the second largest industrial activity in the world. Like farming, building is being torn loose from its rootedness in the earth. What can one do to re-root building, in a way comparable, say, to the way the organic farming movement attempts to re-root farming? Why should one even try?

The ageless way of building is at once unthought and vernacular, although there is no equivalence between lack of thinking and the vernacular. The un-scientific thought but deeply lived act of building must to be rediscovered, perhaps in a new kind of thinking. To think building is most commonly to think non-vernacular building—modernism and efficiency, postmodernism and fun, and more. Is it possible to think the non-vernacular in a way that constitutes a recovery of the vernacular as something more than scholarship or antiquarianism? Could there be a meta- or post-nonvernacular that is re- (in the sense of "really") vernacular?

After "Building Dwelling Thinking"

In his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," with its three titles laid down like stones on a path, Heidegger begins abruptly. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, he begins to speak, and in his written speech to reverse the order of what has been laid down, saying that he wants to think dwelling and building. The essay is, in fact, divided into two sections—the first on dwelling, the second on building—followed by an epilogue reflecting on what happens when these two are set down side by side.

In the initial section, Heidegger notes how, in contemporary parlance, we distinguish between those structures, such as houses, which are dwellings, and those, such as bridges and stadiums, which are not. What is distinctive about dwellings is that human beings are at rest within them. Nevertheless, Heidegger notes, in a more expansive sense humans are at rest also within structures, because

they play out their lives as a whole going about their business by traversing back and forth across bridges, attending to games in stadiums, and more. In this sense dwelling is the end of building, the means.

But in a deeper sense, building is already itself a kind of dwelling—an end. Humans not only are at rest within dwellings, they are and find themselves in building. In their dwelling they build. This is revealed, as often is the case with Heidegger, through attending to language. The German word *bauen* (to build) is etymological related to certain forms of the verb *sein* (to be), as in *Ich bin* (I am), or *Du bist* (you are). Indeed, according to Heidegger, *Ich bin* may even be translated not as “I am” but “I dwell.” Understood as building, moreover, *bauen* also, and in the first instance, means to cultivate and to care for. *Der Bauer* is the dwelling peasant farmer first, and only the builder or carpenter second. Prior to and more fundamental than building as construction is building as cultivation, a sense of building which is a “preserving and nurturing,” rather than the making of some thing. Finally, in this primordial sense, building is indicative of what it means to be human.

But what, more fully, does it mean to dwell humanly? It means, suggests Heidegger, to build and rest in the clearing in which the earth below and the sky above are held together, in which the divinities are acknowledged as other than ourselves as mortals. Furthermore, concretely—both in cultivation and construction—human beings bring to pass such dwelling with the fourfold by building.

In the second section of his essay, Heidegger thus turns to building. Using the example of a bridge, he describes or points out how this construction assembles and opens up a space between earth and sky, in relation to both mortals who traverse it and the divinities whose statues adorn it. As at once an opening up and holding together of the fourfold, the bridge is a thing. It is, moreover, things in this rich and primordial sense that constitute place, of which space is an abstraction.

In the epilogue, reflecting on what has transpired in this meditation on dwelling and building, Heidegger affirms as well a primordial sense of *techné* as not constructing but bringing forth. In a translation of Heidegger’s words:

[T]he essence of bringing forth buildings can be thought adequately neither as architecture or as engineering construction, nor as a simple combination of the two. [Indeed,] the bringing forth of buildings would fittingly be defined *not even if* we were to think of it in the sense of the original Greek *techné* as *only* a letting-appear.... [Instead,] the essence of building is letting dwell. [And] dwelling... is *the foundation* of Being, according to which mortals are (pp. 34 and 35).

Attempting to say after Heidegger what Heidegger says, perhaps it would not be too far off to note that, as a cultivation, dwelling building is akin to a writing on the earth. Dwellings are to be read, and in the reading we dwell. Precisely what is unsettling about modern technological construction is that, instead of holding together earth and sky, mortals and divinities, it penetrates the earth to extract resources, pushes beyond the sky with rockets and satellites, attempts to suppress mortality with medicine and drugs, and precisely in this attempt to control the body, rejects the art of dying, and thereby and in the very process the remembering of the divinities that is the most intimate part of human suffering.

Human beings cannot live without some building. But philosophically speaking, as Hannah Arendt suggests, perhaps it is in deeds and words that this building takes place as much or even more than with the the hands.

The Vanishing Vernacular

All homes, while they are homes, are vernacular.

The vernacular is that which, according to Ivan Illich, "is homemade, homespun, homegrown, not destined for the marketplace": in it people dwell, not just live or reside. Moreover, dwellings are "never completed before occupancy." Instead, vernacular "building goes on from lifetime to lifetime." One becomes a vernacular builder the same way one becomes a vernacular speaker—by growing up, living, and dwelling in a particular place at a particular time. The vernacular house is human dwelling made visible, enriched with material traces from its lived past.

Such a vernacular house is vanishing, being made increasingly impossible by changes in science and technology—and in their relationships.

First, science has transformed the meaning of matter, and the science of construction has turned building from a historical experience of inter-generational cooperation—learning over time what works, and passing this on by tradition and apprenticeship—into one of thinking through by means of structural formulas. At the same time, the authority of science has been replaced with the celebration of irony. Who cares what science says, we say, even as we appeal to just what science says, except in those margins of commerce where it makes no difference.

Second, technology has expanded the world of artifice to the point that even nature has become an artifact—preserved in museums, protected in national forests and wilderness areas, and managed by global climate treaties. Technology likewise has deepened its penetration into the lifeworld from the first-order technics of the hand-made, through the second-order technics of the machine-made, to the third-order technics of the virtual, each wrapped around and enclosing, while transforming the other. The

lower order technologies of mailbox, clipboard, and rotary telephone are preserved as icons on the screen of the computer.

Third, society—itself a modern construct replacing *polis* and the state—has become a portable stage for enacting the cut-up and folded-in (William Burroughs) media dramas of commerce, politics, and entertainment. No one really lives here. In a world in which the number of motel rooms approaches that of houses, houses themselves become McMansion motels—and citizens become consumers. Anyone who would try to subordinate science or technology to social regulation is dependent on science for standards, on technology for communications, and on society itself flickering alive only in popular approval and market share. There are no more “words from our sponsor” because the sponsor’s product is featured in the MTV video of the “green music,” if not the movie.

Cut-up and folded-in, science and technology become technoscience. Blended with commerce, politics, and entertainment, technoscience becomes the Mars Rover Website. We live here like we live on Mars: through cameras, recordings, sensors, transmissions, and the screen.

A century or so ago in North America, the vernacular house was turned by advances in transportation and communications into what might be called the standard or “popular” house. First, materials and styles jumped regional borders. What was once native to place became universal construction options: the Cape Cod house, the ranch-style house, etc.

Then the materials themselves began to come in molded, interchangeable panels and disposable modules. The popular “mechanic” or owner-built house, even though handmade, became less and less made by hand—and more and more made according to a packaged pattern with power tools and skills. Amateur builders were further seduced with log-kit and precut houses. The imaginative, trash-based hovels of the Mexican-American *frontera*, even the shacks of the “homeless” in Los Angeles or New York, in many instances are more “housing by people” than the do-it-yourself suburbs of mid-America.

Post-Vernacular Construction

The vernacular house is vanishing. I know this not simply from history, but because I tried to build one—and failed.

My attempt to build a vernacular house began with the purchase of a piece of semiarid land in the western United States, on the eastern slope of the snow-capped Sangre de Cristo Mountains. On this land were the ruins of a mining town—Alamo, Colorado—from the 1930s. The remains of Alamo were thirty to forty house foundations, all surrounded by rubble, mostly handmade cement brick. At one side of the town stood three 25-foot-high corners of a once-thriving general store. As if sponsoring reflection, the ruins suggested, “Let us build here again.”



Notes on Reconfiguring Alamo images

1

The ultimate design for me is the natural world with its "ten thousand things," its "more than can be imagined" things, its shifting patterns of order and disorder.

2

The pristine beauty of nature is something we respond to even as children. Somehow we want to claim it as ours so that we can experience it in the deepest way whenever we want.

3

By the time I could financially claim my own piece of beautiful land, I no longer wished to disturb anything remotely pristine. I wanted to preserve, not disturb; I wanted to demonstrate respect and stewardship.

4

Already disturbed land, "ruined" land — now that was something else. That was land on which I could practice the arts of living without causing further harm.



What I wanted was to build on the margin of these ruins, incorporating the foundation of a former store manager's dwelling, scavenging and reusing old brick in ways that would honor both material memories of those families who once lived here and the high mountain desert landscape—the sandstone and broom weed, the piñon pine, the horny toad, field mouse, and rattlesnake, and the coyote, antelope, big horn sheep, and bear. I wanted to camp on the land and learn its contours, gathering materials slowly—thinking, dwelling, and building only as seemed appropriate while I rummaged among the rubble.

But there were forces that made such an approach un-dreamable: the bank and building inspector—and my own impatience, incontinence, and incorporation in artificial lifeways that I could criticize but not escape.

For the bank to provide a construction loan, it is necessary to have a building permit. To get a building permit, it is necessary to have a plan, a design. The house I wanted to build while dwelling and thinking had, instead, to be planned and designed while commuting and calculating. On one visit, I would try to figure out this, on another visit that.

My dream had been of a dialogue with the local landscape and its history. But the bank and the building inspector—and the demands of time and responsibility—required that this dialogue be scripted in advance, if not transformed into a monologue. Everyone had to know what to say. It was technically illegal, I discovered, even to move onto the land without permits and plans. "You have to know what you want to do," I was told—when all I knew was that I wanted to be taught by the rubble below and the open sky above, and the mortals and gods lurking in their midst.

In saying that this attempt to build a vernacular house failed I am, of course, adopting a particular view of the vernacular. The vernacular itself is a contested terrain, with at least three points of leverage on material culture: the vernacular of orality, the vernacular of art and literature, and the vernacular of mathematics. The vernacular of an oral tradition is not open to us. It is only between the vernacular of the alphabet and of numbers that we may choose.

In North America, it is vernacular mathematics that rules. The inspirational literature of, for example, *Architecture without Architects* and *Shelter* provides no practical guidance. Ken Kern's *The Owner-Built Home*, although it attempts to use numbers gently because it addresses do-it-yourselfers from Maine to California who would build everything from one-room houses to two-story barns, has to resort to at least rudimentary formulas and tables. The same goes for every other written effort to communicate the builder's craft. Charts replace apprenticeship.

Kern's five basic principles nevertheless can keep one grounded to some degree:

- First, pay as you go—don't get a bank loan.
- Second, do your own work.
- Third, follow your own best judgment.
- Fourth, use local materials whenever possible.
- Fifth, design and plan your own home.

If these five principles could be adhered to—supplemented by the assumption that one lives in the house one builds—one would come close to a reconstitution of the vernacular, perhaps even what Gary Snyder calls rehabilitation.

The real stumbling blocks, of course, are principles one and five. Who can build without some help from the bank? And don't the very actions of planning and designing necessarily detach one from the building process itself?

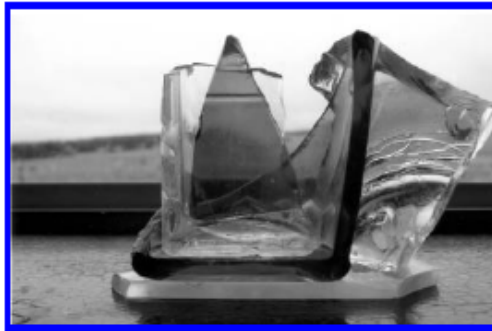
Because of an embeddedness within technoscientific culture and family responsibilities that could not be set aside or sublimated to new orders, I gave in on the first principle right from the start. I went to the bank and applied for a construction loan. This at least allowed me to live on the site for much of the time I was building. I could afford to camp there on the verge of illegality—pseudo-dwelling and weak thinking, day in and day out for a long summer of owner building.

But the bank loan also forced me to do design work, which I struggled with, learned from—and sometimes failed at. Building codes forced me to do things I didn't want to do. And more than once I did not pass code-driven inspections, and had to do things over again.

At the same time, there is much to be said for building codes and construction standards. Technical standards are an unheralded way to exercise social control over technology. The problem is that these same standards too often mirror technical ideals and practices. They echo and reinforce the self-serving demands of materials fabricators, the construction practices of corporate contractors, and the risk calculations of insurance companies. Is there a way around such technical prejudices? Could there be alternative standards?

Some of my failures actually turned out to be the best parts because, as a result, walls had to be constructed in unplanned places and therefore grew up, vernacular-like, in the middle of the building, construction dwelling on the site, and thinking. But they were costly, too. Consider only the plumbing and wiring. Because I had to hire a licensed plumber and a licensed electrician—because this is what the plumbing inspection and the electrical inspections required—I had to tell these professionals what to do: with drawings, with plans, and with designs. It had to be thought out beforehand, for another's hand.

When I didn't get this right before the other's hand and tools went to work, the result was that plumbing or wiring had to be moved or redone. So I had to pay twice for one piece of work. It



Sculptures made from found material,
some natural, some fabricated,
on the land at Alamo.



References

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cost more to be vernacular. "Don't you know what you want?" the plumber asked me once.

No, I don't know what I want—until it happens. Vernacular architecture is a like action painting. One has to try out many alternatives before getting a good fit. If that trying out is projected on, and limited to, the drafting table—even more to the computer screen—I lose the hand-with-its-hammer, my body, in the building. My body, instead, becomes a tool of the plan, the design. "Take the measurement from here, just like it specifies in the plan. Put the wall there, just like it says. Can't you follow directions?"

In the vernacular world, directions are inherently unclear. Technoscience and engineering aspire to make it all clear—which also clears out the vernacular.

To resist the virtual life of design is possible—but only as a rearguard action. The avant-garde reactionaries of Jesse Tatum's home power movement are a perfect example. They do not lead to the vernacular house so much as to the minimally connected habitat and home, imperfectly reflecting unrealized dreams. Yet is it not the case that all homes, as they become transformed by do-it-yourself projects, over time, partake more and more of dreams—and of the vernacular?

This article has been cited by:

1. Paul Stangl. 2008. The vernacular and the monumental: memory and landscape in post-war Berlin. *Geojournal* 73:3, 245-253. [[CrossRef](#)]