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Stories Buildings Tell, Lives Buildings Shape: The Enduring Tradition of Vernacular Architecture Research in North American Folkloristics

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Guest Editorial

Éditorial Invité

MICHAEL J. CHIARAPPA AND GABRIELLE A. BERLINGER

Stories Buildings Tell, Lives Buildings Shape: The Enduring Tradition of Vernacular Architecture Research in North American Folkloristics

The History of Folkloristic Approaches to the Study of Architecture

Amidst the expanding scope of historical and cultural inquiry of the 1960s, the study of vernacular architecture assumed a compellingly new place in North American folkloristics. While the very source material we categorize as "vernacular architecture" was well entrenched among those who studied North America's architectural history and regional cultures, it can be said—with certain authority—that folkloristic handling of built environments instituted a wave of methodological and interpretive perspectives that then, and now, ripple well beyond the folklorist's immediate disciplinary boundaries. In 1963, Don Yoder's historiographical assessment of the folklife studies movement in Europe and the United States began framing an interdisciplinary paradigm that would guide the ethnological examination of vernacular architecture. When he became sole editor of *Pennsylvania Folklife* in 1961 (a post he held until 1978), the journal already had a record of publishing articles on folk architecture (Primiano 2015: 110-11). But Yoder's express vision for North American folklife studies clearly saw building types and building patterns as vital in producing cultural history more representative of America's diverse social fabric, and furthermore, as necessary in serving the endurance of traditional culture and delineating the contours of America's distinct cultural regions.

He was not alone in this sentiment. While Yoder's thinking on the role of vernacular architecture was evolving and making it a centrepiece of folklife research, so was that of Louis C. Jones, a former English and folklore professor who had assumed the directorship of the New York State Historical Association in 1947, and, over the next twenty-five years, would make its Farmers' Museum and Cooperstown Graduate Program in Folk Culture (founded in 1964) a crucible for the study of North America's traditional built environments (Livermore 2011: 74-75; Glassie and Truesdell 2008: 64-65). Both Yoder and Jones saw folklife studies as offering a democratizing vision for the presentation of American history and culture, and central to this enterprise was their mutual commitment to Scandinavian-inspired living history museums or folk museums (Yoder 1963: 49-50; Marshall 1977)—initiatives where vernacular architecture is the centrepiece, where buildings "show the equivalent of what folklore [oral tradition] does in print" (Jones 1950: 14-16). Corresponding with the momentum generated by the folklife studies movement was the work of geographer Fred Kniffen. While he had spent a career studying material folk culture, in 1965 he synthesized years of fieldwork into a statement that put forward American folk housing as a critical expression of cultural patterns, cultural diffusion, and cultural endurance across time and space. Such a reading of vernacular landscape, buttressed by British geographers (e.g. E. Estyn Evans, Iorwerth Peate, J. Geraint Jenkins) who were advancing a similar paradigm for folklife

research across the Atlantic, stood ready to shape a new role for built environments in North American folkloristics. A sense of social purpose attended these developments: the notion that folkloristic handling of vernacular architecture could serve the public trust by providing communities with ethnographically richer portraits of local life that were typically lacking in most historical and cultural representation. For Jones, this could best be realized through interdisciplinary collaboration and use of "all the resources known to historians, folklorists, and museists" (Jones 1956: 3). A new dialogue was gripping vernacular architecture and folklorists were at the centre of it.

Against this backdrop, Kniffen had a chance encounter with Henry Glassie in 1962 while they were both observing an exhibit at the Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, New York. Glassie (at the time an undergraduate at Tulane University) and Kniffen immediately bonded over their mutual interest in material folk culture. Glassie's prodigious knowledge and fieldwork experience so impressed Kniffen that he left the encounter by holding out to Glassie the prospect of his becoming "the Francis James Child of folk architecture." For the remainder of his undergraduate years, Kniffen mentored the young folklorist, the two sharing a deep commitment to fieldwork, scrupulous building documentation, and the formulation of building typologies (Vlach 1995: 330-31; see also the Glassie interview in this issue). From this encounter and the scholarly relationship that ensued, Glassie began forging a new—indeed unprecedented—niche for vernacular architecture within American folkloristics—a mode of inquiry whose influence resonated widely and gave folklore research prominent standing in the emergent interdisciplinary field of material culture studies.

While a number of Glassie's early articles revealed this direction (see Glassie 1964; 1965; 1965-66; 1966a; 1966b), it was the publication of his book, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (1968), that set the foundation for a paradigm shift in folkloristic thinking toward vernacular architecture. Framed by diffusion theory he learned under Kniffen, Glassie punctuated the primacy of careful fieldwork, tasking folklorists with identifying a building's form, construction, and use to determine how traditional culture held firm, or was negotiated, through time and space. Compatible with folklore scholarship's longstanding orientation to the place-based/small-group nature of its subject matter, Glassie declared vernacular architecture to be arguably the best gauge for interpreting regional culture—both historically and in contemporary contexts. The continuing relevance of *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* is how it tangibly introduces students of vernacular architecture to the abiding premise of his subsequent work—that fieldwork delineates the critical function of architectural form in expressing a community's cultural temperament and the vernacular builder's capacity for balanced, socially accountable creativity. Glassie was clear in explaining that, if taken seriously, such analytical constructs would problematize how we framed interpretation of historical change and what source materials—principally architecture—would best serve in reckoning the inherent tensions underlying cultural endurance and social transformation. The more modest scope of *Pattern* may have been of identifying vernacular architecture as "of greatest use in the drawing of regions," but its unabashed artifact-centred and artifact-driven approach put folklorists squarely into an interdisciplinary mix with historians, anthropologists, geographers, art historians, and museologists.

Fieldwork brought empirical rigour to the study of folk landscapes, but the folklorist's authoritative voice and interpretive vision was contingent on deciphering vernacular architecture's context. Glassie's turn toward more incisive contextual concerns corresponded with a newfound energy in North American folkloristics, a perspective intent on understanding a building's expressive depth. Architectural historian Dell Upton would later describe Glassie's reckoning with context as a desire to see how vernacular architecture "embodies the enduring values and deepest cognitive structures of a social group" (1983: 270). For Glassie, the quest to discern the mind of the everyday builder and everyday user—to unravel the competence, intention, and cultural dynamics that brought thought and soul to the building process—began with *Pattern* and evolved through investigations culminating in *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (1975). Dismayed that historic artifacts were not taken seriously as

source material for doing the history of everyday life, Glassie devised a generative grammar—the architectural rules—used by vernacular builders in Middle Virginia. By enumerating these rules based on careful structural analysis, Glassie aimed to show how Middle Virginia's builders synthesized Georgianization's cultural temperament into forms and idioms that were useful and culturally compatible with local norms in the 18th and 19th centuries. Perhaps most importantly from a folkloristic perspective, he introduced the idea of performance, that the builder's architectural competence resided in a firm command of architectural grammar and thus empowered the builder to perform—to render—housing that resonated with the community's deepest cultural values; in short, builders were identified as vital agents in crafting the most salient contours of their social and cultural world—the vernacular landscape.

The theoretical and methodological reach of Glassie's work took on greater influence with the publication of *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (1982), an achievement that in Charles Joyner's words, "synthesizes the advances of a generation of work in folkloristics" (1983: 151). In doing so, it also marked Glassie as the generational voice of folkloristic thinking on vernacular architecture, its section "Working the Land" offering the fullest articulation of how buildings and their wider landscape enact a community's enduring cultural prerogatives, and, when confronted with change, provide the means—in design, construction, and use—to subtly express and manage tensions that inevitably arise. By the turn of the 21st century, Glassie had, over the course of his career, conducted exhaustive fieldwork in the United States and Ireland, Turkey and Bangladesh, and in scattered locales around the globe. In doing so, he put vernacular architecture and landscape forward as a society's existential bellwether—whether it concerned rendering building material from nature or house types diffusing across time and space or builders incorporating fashionable idioms into traditional design process or "passing the time" in an Irish household drinking tea and engaging in good talk (Glassie 2000). If tradition mediated and gave expression to the challenges of the human condition, then the design and use of vernacular architecture defined its folkloristic relevancy and offered key insight into how local communities exercised cultural resiliency and innovation in a complex world.

Glassie's fieldwork efforts and commitment to find meaning in ordinary buildings stimulated an array of possibilities for interpreting vernacular landscapes, and a new generation of folklorists took note. John Michael Vlach's exploration of the movement of the shotgun house from its origins in Africa to North America was evidence of the turn that vernacular architecture had taken among an emerging cohort of folklorists. Extensive comparative fieldwork in Africa, the Caribbean, and the American South lent authority to Vlach's scrupulous analysis of the shotgun house's form and the syncretistic forces gripping its transatlantic voyage. Vlach's engagement with Robert Farris Thompson's compelling interpretation of the connection between African and African-American art history marked continuing momentum among folklorists to conduct interdisciplinary dialogue with others who shared a stake in examining vernacular architecture (Vlach 1986 [1976]). Another Glassie student, Howard Wight Marshall, followed suit by employing cultural geographic method and careful building documentation to illuminate the cultural temperament—"the regional personality"—of the area of Missouri known as Little Dixie (1981).

A number of folklorists took a decided turn towards examining vernacular architecture in dialogue with what has been variously called ethnographic history, cultural history, or the new social history (see St. George 1986 [1982]; 1988; 1990; 1998). For Robert St. George, from the start of his career, this meant the "historical analysis of expressive behavior"—the prospect that vernacular architecture, in tandem with other forms of material culture, could get us to the heart of 17th and 18th-century New England's most affirming cultural patterns and reveal those social tensions emerging from political and economic change. Acknowledging the ethnographic and artifactual rigour necessary to accomplish his enterprise, St. George, in a way that has marked all his work, saw these ends best achieved through "the logical intersection of two disciplines: local history and folklore" (1979: 12-13). Similarly, Bernard Herman's investigation of Middle Atlantic vernacular architecture has been committed to interpreting it in historic contexts

where it operates relationally among a "discourse of objects" (1992: 5); in short, buildings function as expressive systems whose meaning is vested "in the ways in which people employ objects in the organization of everyday social relationships" (1992: 8). Seeing the meaning of buildings in terms of their capacity to be socially discursive is a proposition that squarely aligns with American folkloristics and its emphasis on group communication and recognition of those genres—material and nonmaterial—that empower it. Herman asks a question that is just as germane now as it was when he first made it eighteen years ago: how do we, "ethnographers of past communities separated by time, place, and *mentalité* from the people we seek to understand, how are we to unravel the symbolically rich material fabric of social significance" (1992: 4)? Asserting that the answer is in "the discursive process," Herman contends that such interpretation rests on our use of "historical archaeology's sense of physical and temporal associations with folklore's sense of group expression and interaction as well as the collective social and economic research advanced by the 'new social history' " (1992: 7). Along with St. George and Herman, Thomas Carter's career-long examination of Utah's Mormon landscape has also integrated historical method with folklore's prevailing interpretative frame. Epitomizing the power of this analytical frame—one premised on the communicative depth of the material world—Carter sees Utah's 19th-century vernacular landscape as an expressive system of buildings (housing, civic and occupational structures, temples, meetinghouses) intent on unifying Mormonism's spiritual vision, but hardly immune from the challenges of any folk community seeking to establish its place amidst the complex modern dynamics consuming wider American society (Carter 2015).

Other folklorists, more tethered to the field's tradition of doing ethnography in living communities, have been able to convey, with notable clarity, just how socially-operable vernacular architecture can be in any number of community contexts. Gerald Pocius affirmed this line of analysis when he described Calvert, Newfoundland's vernacular landscape as being the fulfillment of a spatial culture—one premised on a collective ethos where "shared spaces" are vital in ensuring the community's fishing, farming, and woodcutting economy. Pocius's thorough ethnography of Calvert's building patterns displayed the folklorist's capacity to continually re-think how we interpret vernacular architecture. An analysis so heavily informed by "shared spaces" gets to the heart of folklore's creative essence as collective cultural expression whose logic affirms everyday existence. From this perspective, folkloristic insight unveils the transcendent messaging of vernacular architecture, along with its function in upholding social relations in Calvert: "Community existence is not just residing in a place, it is belonging—with attendant benefits and obligations" (Pocius 1991: 8, 25). Not unlike Pocius, Michael Ann Williams struck a similar chord using intensive building documentation and oral history to create a bridge between folkorists and historians, deploying ethnographic rigour to address concerns both practicioners face in understanding the experiences that shape the enduring meaning of built environments. In her focused treatment of folk building in southwestern North Carolina, she utilized oral history to not only sharpen interpretation of connections linking floor plan and social use, but to also show how folk landscapes structure spatial memory and the deep cultural longing one has for "homeplace" (Williams 1991).

While vernacular architecture has assumed a quieter place in folklore research in recent years, its relevance has never been more vital. Folklorists pride themselves in identifying the nuance of tradition, the subtle ways that human agency negotiates the sweeping patterns of past and contemporary life. In their attentiveness to ethnographic detail, folklorists have shown—and will continue to show—that what is too often blythely overlooked in built environments is precisely what is most meaningful; indeed, it is the modest, self-effacing character of ordinary buildings and places that motivate our curiosity, a response to the aesthetic sensibility and social purpose architecture provides on a daily basis. Most recently, Joseph Sciorra has shown that generations of Italian-Americans have infused the landscape with their ethnic identity and religious faith through the construction of home altars, shrines, grottoes, Christmas displays, and religious processions. Such expressions—what Sciorra refers to as "vernacular sites of Catholic religiosity"—compellingly reveal how everyday

places frame the creative exercise of Italian-American religious experience (2018). Along with Sciorra, Gabrielle Berlinger provides folklorists with a similar service in her examination of sukkah, temporary structures constructed during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot to commemorate the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. While clearly a marker of religious identity—a practice dating to over three thousand years—the enduring tradition and range of creativity in these structures speaks to their utility in constantly adapting to, and expressing, on-going cultural, political, and philosophical issues of concern to the Jewish community (2017). Both Sciorra and Berlinger, in their emphasis on built environments, show how material expression enacts Leonard Norman Primiano's definition of vernacular religion, the recognition of "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it." Their work, fusing the study of vernacular architecture and vernacular belief, substantiates Primiano's call to do "justice to the experiential component of people's lives" (1995: 43-44).

Folklorists who study vernacular architecture have, and continue to be, vital partners in collaborations with public folklore, historic preservation, public history, and cultural resource management (Carter and Fleischhauer 1988; Sommers 2019). Gary Stanton brought a folkorist's perspective to the flouresence of the University of Mary Washington's historic preservation program, while Paula Johnson's curatorial and public programming role at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, and her fieldwork in the Chesapeake region, forged important insights into linkages between occupational folklife and vernacular landscapes (1988; 1997). Janet Gilmore has advanced similar goals in her work in the Upper Midwest, both in her role as a public folklorist and professor at the University of Wisconsin. As we confront the wider effects of the anthropocene, folklorists will occupy an ever-increasing role in linking vernacular architecture, environmental history, and environmental sustainability, clarifying how buildings and landscapes factor into any number of contexts and ecological niches (Chiarappa 2018; Hufford 1986). All of these issues, and many more, show that the tradition of folkorists studying vernacular architecture and vernacular landscapes is as relevant now as it was over fifty years ago when Henry Glassie established a new vision for the field. The essays in this special volume of *Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle*—and the wider possibilities they speak to—convey the necessity of keeping vernacular architecture research vibrant in North American folkloristics.

This Collection and Our Future Path

This special volume of *Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle* highlights the role that folklorists have played in vernacular architecture studies within North America. How did folklorists contribute a distinctive approach to the study of commonplace structures and landscapes as the field was emerging, and how are new generations of folklorists offering critical perspectives today? This collection of essays is the culmination of academic panels and roundtable discussions that folklorists convened at the Vernacular Architecture Forum (VAF), the American Folklore Society (AFS), and the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) between 2015 and 2018. The impetus to host these reflective conversations was a collective concern: "Where have all the folklorists gone?," we asked at the VAF, and "Where are all the vernacular architecture scholars?," we pondered at the AFS. As a result, established and emerging scholars whose work bridged the two fields came to the table at each conference to examine the historic overlap of folklore and vernacular architecture studies, to consider how these fields have distinguished themselves over the past forty years, and to envision their future contributions to the invaluable study of our surroundings.

Grounded in ethnographic methodology, folklorists draw upon deep engagement with individual builders and users of vernacular spaces, in addition to closely documenting material forms. The merging of discourse-based analysis with formal object study allows for a complex interpretation of both sense of self and sense of place. This relationship-driven and object-based approach reveals how people design and read their physical surroundings in relation to their histories, current conditions, and aspirations. Rather than define a boundary

between the fields of folklore and vernacular architecture studies, therefore, this collection illuminates the interdisciplinary roots that bridge the two pursuits and investigates how the diverse methods of adjacent disciplines such as cultural geography, anthropology, philosophy, art history, and history became synthesized in folkloristic training to create a particular approach to the study of vernacular architecture.

In these pages, you will discover research and writing that demonstrates how close listening, deep fieldwork, attention to interior spaces as well as exterior structures, affective experience, and the interpretation of built environments through the lenses of gender and race in addition to class, all define the folkloristic approach.

Meghann E. Jack's "An Architecture of Closeness: The Ross Family Double Farmhouse in St. Mary's, Nova Scotia" explores the physical manifestation of human intimacy and comfort in an historic context. Jack examines how architectural choices made in the design of the Ross House "contribute to the social reproduction of kinship" within the family, the duplex building structuring social relations despite the supposed isolation of farm life. She further analyzes how the design of the house itself resists change and preserves a secure past. We trace similar expressions of human relationships and resistance in the work of Elijah Gaddis and Puja Sahney. Gaddis' "Work, Play, and Performance in the Southern Tobacco Warehouse" chronicles the use of tobacco warehouses in the southern United States. Gaddis finds the warehouses to be places of both work and play in the context of Jim Crow segregation, examples of "spatialized resistance to segregation" as Black celebrants used them as sites of "radical potential and pleasure." His work highlights how the unintended use of everyday architecture harnesses the power of place and becomes an archive of community experience. Also examining interior spaces but in the domestic context, Puja Sahney's "Producing Sacred Space in Secular Kitchens: South Asian Immigrant Women's Hindu Shrines in American Domestic Architecture" presents the case of home shrines created by newly immigrated Hindu women to the United States. Her analysis of kitchen shrines raises awareness not only of the production of sacred space in the home, but of the creative adaptation of a given environment to meet religious needs. Sahney's work counters traditional vernacular architecture studies through its focus on the agency of women in the interpretation of an architecture and the construction of meaningful space within. In addition, she examines a vernacular religious practice from the perspective of material culture rather than from the more common perspective, holy text. Her study of Hindu home altars reflects the turn in both material culture studies and religious studies to recognize the role of material culture in the lived experience of religion, an oft-neglected approach to understanding religious belief and performance. These three essays together illustrate how both traditional and transgressive uses of vernacular spaces reveal the social structures, cultural customs, and historic conditions that their occupants embrace and resist. They show how folkloristic approaches work to include often overlooked perspectives on spaces and structures, and open up new insights into how building adaptation empowers the endurance and expression of traditional culture.

The three remaining essays in this issue examine questions of architectural pattern and placement in the broader context of community use and meaning. Thomas Carter's "Notes from the Field: Architecture and Ecumenical Life in Indiana's Whitewater River Valley, 1800-1860" offers a detailed field study of German architecture in southern Indiana. His findings reveal how parish architecture played a role in establishing spatial parameters for community life, and how new building traditions mapped the assimilative processes of immigrants upon arrival in North America. His fieldwork with Gary Stanton emphasizes the folklorist's ethnographic practice in the tradition of "driving through the countryside looking for old houses and barns, talking to folks about their buildings." Carter sketches for us the process of cultural documentation in rural communities as it was engaged by founding members of the field, laying the groundwork for future fieldwork in urban and suburban communities as well. One such study is carried out in Gloria Colom Braña's "Everything but the Car: The Carport as Social Space in Puerto Rican Domestic Architecture." In her essay, Braña examines the Puerto Rican carport's intended and actual use in the context of Puerto Rico's changing socio-economic climate. Through in-

depth fieldwork, Braña concludes that the carport quickly transformed from a single-use space to an all-purpose space as a reflection of "the dreams and illusions of upward mobility." Built for car storage but sheltering hope and promise instead, the carport communicates social need through necessary, adapted use. Lastly, Michael Chiarappa's "The Crab House on Oyster Creek: Folkloristic Response to Vernacular Landscape and its Environmental Moorings" further speaks to community condition and expression as Chiarappa examines the Andersen crab house as one site on a working coastal landscape that enables the production and preservation of traditional ecological knowledge and community placement. Weaving together the occupational and social purposes of the crab house in relation to its surrounding structures and spaces, he analyzes how a sense of place is created by the environmental and aesthetic features of the crab house. In common with Braña's study, Chiarappa's reveals a traditional place as the site of community memory and identity formation in the midst of economic and environmental change. These articles underscore the relevance of the environment in shaping vernacular landscapes and building tradition.

Several key aspects unite all these essays in their folkloristic approach to vernacular architecture. Each essay demonstrates how precise artifact-centred description and ethnographic inquiry produce enriched cultural analysis. Fieldwork remains one of the strongest and most enduring contributions of folklorists and these studies prove how the practice prevents scholars from making premature assumptions about architectural appearance, form, and use, and instead, uncovers the flexibility and versatility of architectural and spatial use. All articles take into consideration the affective qualities of space and structure, bringing sensory dimensions and experiential perspectives into the analysis of physical environments. Folkloristic inquiry not only considers how people holistically experience a space, but also how that space acts on the people who construct and use it. These studies emphasize a performance-centred approach that recognizes people and material culture as active partners in the expression of self within the context of community, each one shaping the other. All the articles highlight how folkloristic approaches to vernacular architecture incorporate what has been variously labeled as microhistory, cultural history, local history, and ethnographic history. They make visible how architecture and space animate the cultural scene of any given time period, and, in turn, demonstrate how built environments provide greater clarity and meaning in any number of past and present explorations of cultural contexts. Ultimately, all these studies address the negotiation of tradition and innovation, a dynamic that centres folklore studies and directs interpretation of the built environment as a mediation of individual will and social circumstance.

In addition to the original articles, this special issue features the personal and professional reflections of five foundational folklorists in the field of vernacular architecture studies: Henry Glassie, Bernard Herman, Michael Ann Williams, Robert St. George, and Gerald Pocius. These voices shed light on benchmark moments and pivotal turns in the development of the field, illuminate influential research and exemplary practice that helped shape its arc, and signal the future direction of folklore and vernacular architecture scholarship. Together, they paint a picture replete with the vibrant colours of fieldwork discovery and challenge, theoretical change and development, creative collaboration, and enduring scholarship driven by ethical values.

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