

Globalisation, vernacularisation and the invention of identities

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Architects are adamant that academic qualifications are a prerequisite for design competence. It is therefore ironic that vernacular architecture is having a significant impact on contemporary architectural design world-wide. In remote, rural communities, vernacular architecture is often culturally entrenched, as well as being the only available construction solution due to technological constraints. Because of the distinctive and unique characteristics of such structures, the people and places concerned are usually immediately identifiable. However, globalisation resulted not only in the dissemination of indigenous solutions – often particularly relevant and aesthetically pleasing – but also in their commodification. Such de-contextualised, vernacular ideas are the essence of vernacularisation; a formal movement subject to individual interpretation and variously motivated by economic exigencies, fashion crazes, or pragmatic concerns. This article analyses the impact of vernacularisation when stripped of its original ideals and used to create new identities. The aim is to explore its value as a contemporary generator of form. The findings could determine the extent to which vernacular studies should be incorporated in architectural scholarship.

Key words: globalisation, identity, regionalism, vernacular architecture, vernacularisation

Globalisering, verinheemsing [vervolksing] en die versinsel van identiteite

Argitekte hou vol dat akademiese kwalifikasies 'n voorvereiste is vir ontwerpbevoegdheid. Dit is derhalwe ironies dat volksargitektuur wêreldwyd 'n beduidende impak het op hedendaagse argitektoniese ontwerp. Volksargitektuur is in verafgeleë landelike gemeenskappe dikwels kultureel-ingeburger, sowel as die enigste beskikbare konstruksie-oplossing as gevolg van tegnologiese beperkings. As gevolg van die besondere en unieke eienskappe van sulke konstruksies is die mense en plekke gewoonlik dadelik herkenbaar. Globalisasie het egter nie net die verspreiding van inheemse oplossings – dikwels besonders toepaslik en esteties aantreklik – moontlik gemaak nie, maar ook die gebruiksnuttigheid daarvan. Sulke volkseie idiees is die wese van verinheemsing; 'n formele beweging wat afhanklik is van individuele interpretasie en by tye gemotiveer word deur ekonomiese vereistes, modegrille, of pragmatiese oorwegings. Hierdie artikel ontleed die impak van volksargitektuur as 'n hedendaagse bron van vorm. Die bevindinge bepaal in watter mate die studie van volksargitektuur by argitektoniese studies ingesluit behoort te word.

Sleutelwoorde: globalisering, identiteit, streeksgebondenheid, verinheemsing, volksargitektuur

The architectural profession insists that academic training alone prepares practitioners to do design. However, the irony is that the vernacular – the building tradition practiced by communities without professional intervention – has had and is still having, a considerable impact on what practising architects design; essentially in response to the sameness, placelessness and concomitant lack of identity characteristic of almost all globalised, contemporary architecture. This reaction has not necessarily emanated solely from the profession; the public has also been insisting on a built environment with which it is able to identify.

Oliver Marc (1977: 121) enquires, “Why is modern architecture so ugly?” before proceeding to expand on “why our [vernacular] villages are beautiful”. Even Juhani Pallasmaa, unquestionably a Modernist architect, “lamented the fact that few modern buildings (in contrast to almost any rural farmhouse) have any emotional appeal” (in Mallgrave & Goodman 2011: 102), asking for an architecture of “regional sensibilities”, and citing Luis Barragán, Alvar Aalto, Álvaro Siza and others; well-known and celebrated architects who reinterpreted their local vernacular idioms in varying levels of abstraction.

Pallasmaa (1988: 129), further protests that that contemporary buildings “that have become only too familiar everywhere impair our sense of locality and identity”. He adds: “Meanwhile, we have learned to admire unique and authentic forms of indigenous and vernacular architecture.”

Due to the writings of Bernard Rudofsky, Paul Oliver and Amos Rapoport, “vernacular architecture research became a mainstream academic activity” (Özkan 2006: 100), but as a relatively freestanding stream; the integration of the vernacular with contemporary architecture constitutes an insignificant portion of the architectural and design theory as taught in academia. The “regional sensibilities” Pallasmaa refers to constitute the *raison d’être* of Critical Regionalism and, while its chief proponents, Liane Lefaivre, Alexander Tzonis and Kenneth Frampton emphasise that Critical Regionalism is not a nostalgic resuscitation of the vernacular, the one unquestionably extends into the other. Although a literal interpretation of the vernacular will rarely be accepted in an academic design project, there are many examples of very popular architect-designed built projects that clearly draw inspiration from vernacular precedent, such as the work by the revered Hassan Fathy. However, an inevitable result of globalisation is that, as Nezar AlSayyad (in Heath 2009: xi) avers, there are “vernacular forms that emerge in the crucible of specific building traditions but that quickly move outside of these traditions.”

Under circumstances where the vernacular is reconceptualised and relocated, it is usually applied as a normative position stripped of the context that generated it in the first place. Although such vernacular forms are often reduced to superficial stylistic imagery, such a position should be a strictly intellectual construct, hence the term “vernacularism” (Özkan 1985/2007: 104).

The central principle is that whereas vernacular traditions constitute bottom-up collective, communitarian conventions, vernacularisation is usually an individualised process and is implemented top-down. In response to the anonymity of the Internationalised Styles, one of the objectives of vernacularisation is to create identities with which users and spectators are able to identify at a personal and societal level. Most pre-industrial vernacular architecture immediately allows outsiders to identify the people and places concerned. As Nezar AlSayyad (2013: 136) writes, “[vernacular forms of settlement] reflected, possibly at the subconscious level, the identity of their inhabitants.” Therefore, whereas vernacular forms used to be ethnic markers (Rapoport 2006: 192), Paul Oliver (2006: 265) states that, due to globalisation, “the distinction between the world’s cultures will cease to have relevance. They will eventually become unrecognizable ...”; but he also adds that “the loss of identity, both of the individual and of the group, will lead to a striving for the reclamation of cultural identity.” Vernacularism, therefore, offers the opportunity to invent identities, whether of place or people.

Aim and method

This article investigates the use of relocated vernacular traditions as inspiration and precedent. Although this practice has produced some “kitsch” (Lefaivre & Tzonis 2012: 142), some quite literal interpretations (such as those by Hassan Fathy) have been hugely significant. Recognising the apparent prominence of Vernacularism as a design doctrine in practice, but the reluctance of academia to accept its theoretical tenets, this article attempts to narrow the gap by exploring the nature of the tension.

Three instances which represent the invention of identities using elements of the vernacular outside of their original settings are discussed. The first is the use of Vernacularism to create identities for fantasy destinations. The second is to create houses that proclaim the desired

identities with which the homeowner hopes to be associated, while the third is the interpretation and application, critically and pragmatically, of local vernacular concepts and elements.

The selected, representative cases in each of these three domains are briefly described in terms of (1) origin; (2) taxonomic qualities vis-à-vis vernacular precedent; (3) impact on the public (and society); (4) impact on the profession; (5) contribution to the intellectual milieu; and (6) resilience and prospects.

Relevant theoretical concepts

Although Frampton (2007: 378; originally published in 1987) maintains that “Regionalism should not be sentimentally identified with the vernacular”, and while Lefaivre and Tzonis (2012: 178) regard Post-Modernism as “indifferent to regionalism”, the indisputable fact remains that these three phenomena exist in a triangular, intrinsically interdependent relationship.

The writings of Suha Özkan, onetime secretary general of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, are considered definitive in the field of Regionalism (Canizaro 2007: 102). Özkan (2007: 107; originally published in 1985) describes Regionalism as a rejection of Internationalism, rather than of Modernism.

Charles Jencks (approximately contemporary with Özkan), in his seminal *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977) and subsequent publications, tirelessly promoted Post-Modernism, identifying three categories that, to some extent, involve the vernacular, although his categories are not perfectly aligned with those of Özkan’s four (figure 1). Jencks uses the term “contextual”, rather than Özkan’s “regional”. It is significant that Özkan (2007: 107) associates Concrete Modern Regionalism with Post-Modernism as a whole, which he claims has not “yet developed its own ethos”, resulting in an “anything goes” situation.

PROPONENT	LITERAL/EXACT	← →		ABSTRACT/ FIGURATIVE
Jencks (born 1939)	Straight Revivalism [Fathy, Spoerry]	Neo-Vernacular [Darbourne & Darke, Moore, Van Eyck]		Contextual [Kriers, Erskine, Stirling, Ungers]
Özkan (born 1945)	Conservative Vernacularism [Fathy]	Interpretive Vernacularism, or Neo-vernacularism [habitation & tourism: Spoerry]	Concrete Modern Regionalism [Post-Modern copying at all scales]	Abstract Modern Regionalism [Correa, Badran]

Figure 1
Jencks (1977) versus Özkan (2007): Post-Modernism versus Regionalism
(source: table by the author).

In reference to Özkan’s classification, the focus of this article is on cases of Vernacularism which intermittently overlaps with Modern Regionalism. Özkan’s (2007: 107) Modern Regionalism is related to both “the monumental architecture of the past, as well as to the civil

architecture to which Vernacularism has to confine itself”. Using Vernacularism as an overarching term for the concept does therefore, not seem contradictory or problematic.

“Identity”, in terms of this article, spans two aspects. The first is the topic of a chapter in Unwin’s (2009:25-34) *Analysing Architecture*, dealing with “Architecture as Identification of Place”. The second is the pre-industrial notion that architecture also serves to identify its inhabitants or users.

The fabrication of identities to announce fantasy destinations

Coinciding with a sense of general disillusionment with Modernism in the 1960s, or more specifically Internationalism, developers realised that entertainment destinations needed to be more imaginative, inevitably resulting in a break from the then prevalent Holiday Coast International tradition (figure 2). An early Post-Modern manifestation was that of casinos, holiday resorts and malls designed to resemble historical precedents.

One of the first examples of this was Port Grimaud, near St Tropez, designed by Francois Spoerry in 1965, described as “the lively and popular neo-Venetian ‘lagoon town’” (Einzig 1981: 34). Another was the development of the Costa Smeralda, a coastal part of Sardinia, as an upmarket coastal resort. In the 1960s, the Aga Khan commissioned Jacques Couëlle (later joined by his son, Savin) to develop the virgin territory and design buildings that would harmonise with the landscape. Most notable is the Hotel Cala di Volpe, described in marketing brochures as appearing to be “an ancient Mediterranean fishing village” (Camillio 2000). Significantly, prior to this development there was no unique, cohesive indigenous architectural tradition on the island; the architects in fact invented the now ubiquitous Sardinian style, with its irregular, curvilinear plan forms and sections.

Charles Jencks (1977: 94) contends in his *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, “[W]hen compared with Modernist new towns, or even modern seaside resorts, these fabrications [“ersatz” towns] are clearly more humane, appropriate and enjoyable—hence their commercial success”. He adds (1977: 95) that “the variety of spatial experience is well above the modernist counterpart”, and (1977: 103) that “such comfortable and cosy images [like Port Grimaud] ... cut across many social lines and appeal to the rich and poor in different countries”.

Özkan (2007: 103), referring to interpretive Vernacularism as Neo-vernacularism, notes that “Neo-vernacularism approaches have dominated a vast amount of design activity to mainly accommodate habitation and tourism functions. It must be due to them being ‘taken for granted’ or to their less innovative, more conformist nature that they did not generate any noteworthy or great architecture.” This case can easily deteriorate into what Lefaivre and Tzonis (2012: 142) call “kitsch, irresponsible analogies”. Özkan (2007: 105) nevertheless admits: “During the short-term experience when tourists take their vacation, the regional vernacular becomes an integral part of the anticipated ambience.”

For the Lost City at the Sun City resort (at Pilanesberg, east of Tshwane), the architects not only invented an ancient African architecture, but their clients, Sun International, also fabricated the history of the people that built it (Van Eeden 2004). This is an extreme example of the Neo-Vernacular idiom, and certainly “kitsch” with its grossly exaggerated elements of a supposed African style. In spite of the fabricated identities of both the place and its purported inhabitants, it is, nevertheless, an immensely popular venue.



Figure 2
Advertisement for the Istanbul Hilton in 1956 (source: Lefaire & Tzonis 2012: 146).

On the other hand, Avianto, described as “honest, yet unpretentious European architecture” on the company website (www.avianto.co.za), is an understated and elegant wedding and function venue near Muldersdrift (figure 3). The general restraint of the forms and finishes, and the quality of its spaces, both indoor and outdoor, make this a tranquil and memorable place. Here a Eurocentric setting was created in an African landscape.

The Neo-Vernacular is outside mainstream academic architectural debate, but has had a tremendous influence on local residential architecture, and arguably contributed to the popularity of the eclectic neo-Vernacular Italianate, Tuscan and Provençal styles.



Figure 3
Avianto Wedding and Function Venue, Muldersdrift (source: photo by the author).

The manipulation of housing styles to proclaim the identities with which the homeowners hope to be associated

Towards the end of the 1960s, many people, including certain architects, began to reconsider the International Style (figure 4). Christian Norberg-Schulz (2000: 8) argues that the Modern Movement neglected “memory and symbols” and stressed the need for Regionalism to create “place”. Oliver Marc (1977: 122) succinctly explains the consequent quest for such housing:

There is still one kind of building today which, if one overlooks its meagre scale, gives satisfaction: the suburban villa. These structures are ugly and often pretentious, of course, but here each owner has created his own clearly defined world in the dimensions of today’s psyche ... In this architecture of individual dreams, these retired people have built the model of their own particular paradise as they see it, and not as others would make them see it.

Of course, “retired” in this instance means “withdrawn” or “reclusive” rather than “on pension”. The demand for individual expression and to recreate “memory and symbols” was the theme for Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, his seminal work published in 1966. He reintroduced traditional elements, such as gables and arches, and completely changed the course of modern architecture. His partner, Denise Scott Brown (1980: 45), referring to “taste publics” and “taste cultures”, asserts in an issue of the highly influential *Harvard Architecture Review* entitled Beyond the Modern Movement that “Town house developments tend to be highly styled, as if to create a stage set for a newly defined way of life. Styling may be ‘traditional’, for example, French Provincial, Colonial, or Spanish Colonial or ‘Modern’.” In

fact, Jencks (1977: 55) points out that according to a survey done in 1976 “the Ideal British Home was Colonial”. He (1977: 58) suggests that the popular vernacular house styles (mentioning Colonial, French provincial and Old English) are mostly Ersatz, that is “there is almost no pretence to historical accuracy” and “few of them are serious, scholarly revivals”. Figure 4 also demonstrates that clients are often prepared to compromise functionality and good practice, such as proper orientation, to achieve the desired effect (figure 5).

Henri Lefebvre (1996: 80) proposes that these households “entrench themselves into the make-believe of habitat”. Developers of themed housing estates exploit this tendency by marketing a “new lifestyle” (Lefebvre 1996: 84), and by implication, an identity that differentiates the inhabitants from other people, mainly emphasising higher status.



Figure 4
A 1960s International Style house in Britain by Michael Manser (source: Park 1971: 76).

Cornelis van Peursen (1974: 9) defines culture simply as “the expression of man’s mode of living”. This is an all-encompassing statement, which may include a sense of social justice that is shared with the majority of the earth’s population, or one’s worldview as a product of religion and belief systems. It may also simply refer to one’s taste for material things and art, which may be compartmentalised (that is, subdivided into items and events) and shared with only a few.

An important principle is that the image projected by the owner’s choice of style reflects the household’s material taste and not necessarily its world view. The design of a house in Saudi Arabia is in a Mediterranean, rather than typically Middle-Eastern style, but the layout embodies all the requirements of privacy for women entrenched in Muslim residential architecture (figure 6). It also embraces contemporary technology; the multi-purpose courtyard – traditionally the women’s domain for domestic activities – is now replaced by air-conditioned living and dining rooms and separate kitchen. Although the owner is clearly adhering to Muslim domestic patterns (the high walls), he still strives to be identified with Greco-Roman sophistication.



Hermanus, South Africa



Serowe, Botswana



Pretoria, South Africa



Mamelodi, South Africa

Figure 5

Examples of “Tuscan” houses in southern Africa (source: photos by the author).



Figure 6

Saudi Arabian house transformation from vernacular to speculative
 (sources: drawing of vernacular house by the author after Talib 1984: 56;
 plan of contemporary house redrawn by the author after Dar Al-Arkan company brochure;
 perspective view from company brochure)

The integration of vernacular elements critically outside their area of origin

In Botswana, towns resembling those in pre-colonial South Africa were built until the mid-20th century. Isaac Schapera (in Comaroff et al 2007: 61) remarks that “the larger chiefdoms retained strong architectural traces of the past; they still do”. To this day, every small town and village features a *kgotla*, the traditional meeting place of the Batswana people where community affairs and customary laws are dealt with.

When architects Bannie Britz and Michael Scholes were commissioned in the early 1980s to design the government buildings in Mmabatho (then the capital of the homeland called Bophuthatswana and still an inherent part of the Batswana heartland), their brief stipulated that they base their design on the concept of the *kgotla*. They subsequently consulted the head of archaeology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Professor Revel Mason. They transformed an essentially small-scale rural homestead into a monumental urban edifice by adopting the vernacular spatial organisation with its central open space and meeting places, and the circular and scalloped geometrical motif of traditional, pre-colonial Tswana settlements. The architects used the elements that identify the rural homestead, and reconfigured it into an institution that is identifiable as a Tswana place of power. The complex, known as Garona, was completed in 1983 (figure 7).

This building substantiates a statement by Sigfried Giedion (2007: 317; originally published in 1954): “[I]t has not been necessary for the architect to be a native of the country in which he is working in order to be able to express its specific conditions.” Britz and Scholes, as white, supposedly Eurocentric architects, have been particularly sensitive and, by avoiding superficial styling, they have managed to design a complex that has been appreciated by the community ever since.

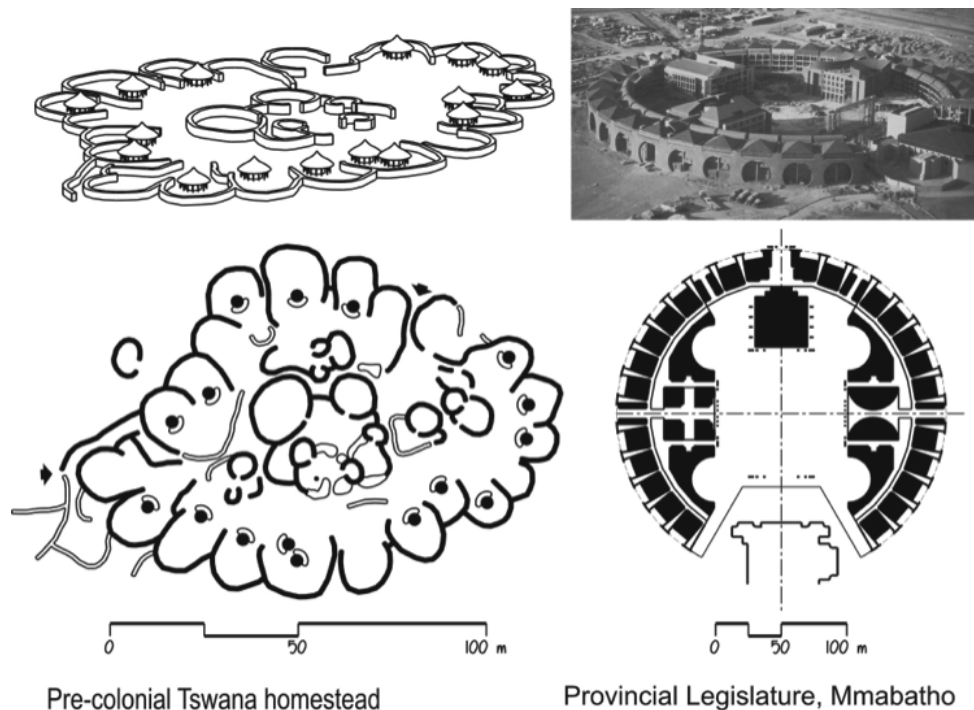


Figure 7
Molokwane and Garona, Mmabatho (sources: photo from Beck 1985: 30; plan by the author after Pistorius, 1992: 18; isometric view by the author projected from the plan).

Eden-on-the-Bay at Bloubergstrand, north of Cape Town, was designed by Stauch Vorster Architects and completed in 2009. It is a compact, mixed-use development, consisting of ground floor shops, restaurants and offices, with 172 one- to four-bedroom apartments above. The site is 2.1 hectares in size, giving a commendable density of 81 units per hectare. The architect who conceptualised the scheme has since left that practice, but apart from the fact that mixed-use schemes are quite rare in South Africa, the morphology reminds one of the vernacular of Stone Town on Zanzibar Island (figure 8). Eden-on-the-Bay complies with all the New Urbanist precepts, but its typology and land use intensity also correspond more to those of Stone Town than of the quintessential New Urbanist project, Seaside in Florida, USA (figure 9).

Rob Krier (1988: 314) comments that “It is a long time ago that ... the house of the poor and the house of the rich were easily comparable in terms of elegance, despite the difference in expenditure and embellishment.” Eden-on-the-Bay offers a configuration that is able to serve the entire socio-economic spectrum, from social to exclusive upmarket housing, as well as mixed-income communities. The pedestrian permeability, informal layout, mixed use and human scale staircases and balconies all contribute towards creating an identity of egalitarianism and inclusivity.



Stone Town, Zanzibar

Eden-on-the-Bay, Bloubergstrand

Figure 8

Eden-on-the-Bay, Bloubergstrand, Cape Town (source: courtesy Stauch Vorster Architects).

The resilience and prospects of Vernacularism

The fundamental assumption of this article is not unique. Kingston Heath (2009: 12), declares “Sometimes, a vernacular resource is the result of the reworking of pre-existing elements that have been transplanted from elsewhere and are adapted to a new environment and new social circumstances”. This is precisely how the Tuscan phenomenon evolved in South Africa, vigorously promoted by the house-and-garden orientated popular press. However, the dynamics and validation of this relocation and adaptation have not been studied extensively.

Robert Maguire, a practising British architect, declared at a RIBA conference in 1976 quite simply that “Vernacular is not a style...it can’t be copied. The significance of the vernacular is as a learning tool” (cited in Jencks & Kropf 1997:172-173). Rapoport (2006: 183) stresses

that “There can also be lessons about responses to climate and energy use, sustainability, the variability of standards and the notion of environmental quality, the nature and attributes of distinctive ambience, preferences for various product characteristics and many other topics.” But, he cautions, “The ability to derive useful lessons [from the study of vernacular design] requires a certain level of abstraction, and requires moving away from the ‘natural history’ stage to a more problem-oriented, conceptual way of addressing the topic.”

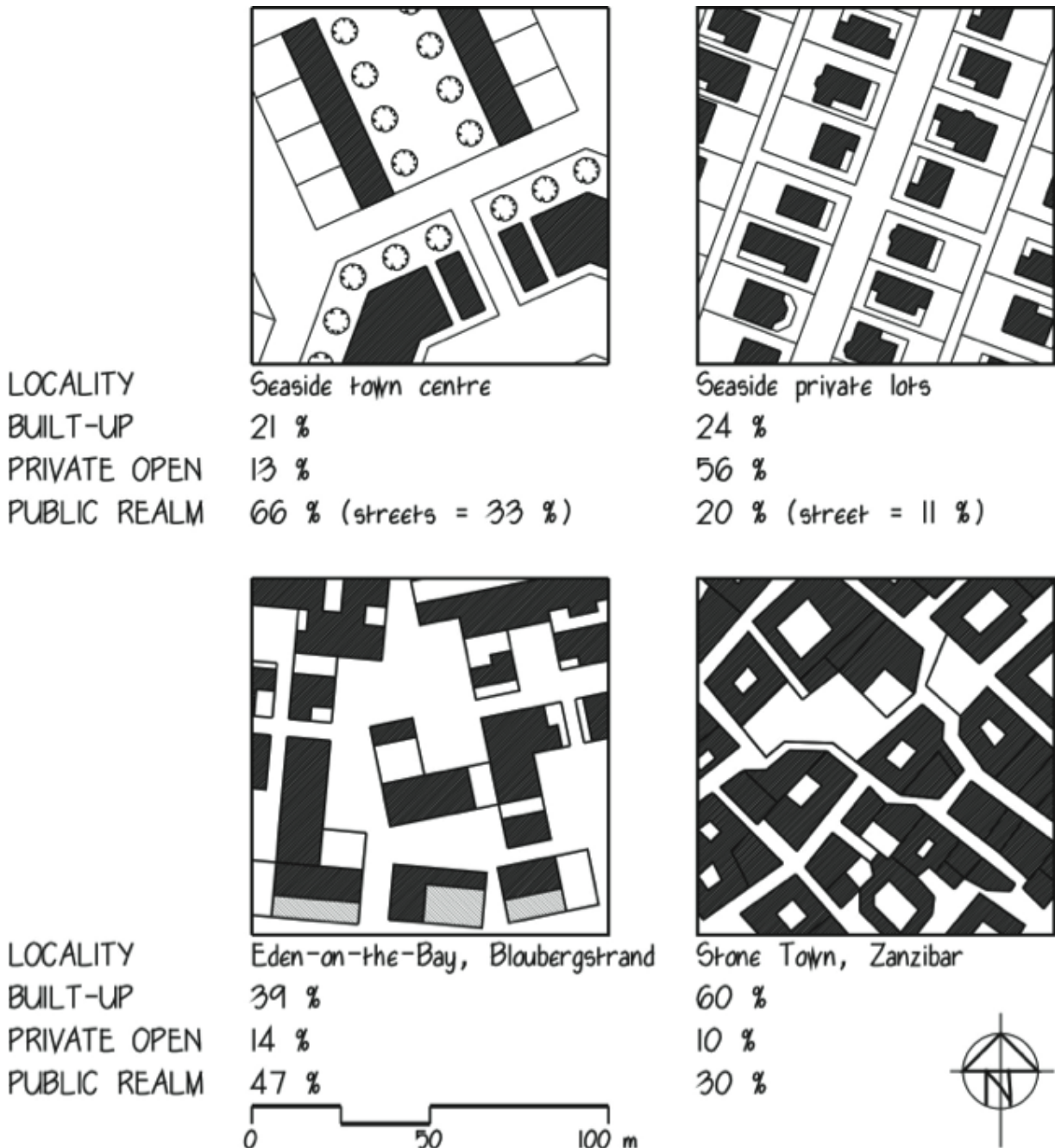


Figure 9
A comparison of 100 m² fragments (source: the author).

Interestingly, this principle is clearly demonstrated in the design by Manser offered as an example of a bland, International Style box (figure 3); the plan was in fact indisputably based on the classic vernacular courtyard houses of the Middle East and North Africa (figure 10). There are many other examples where lessons from the vernacular have been applied in a competent way; whereas Barragán, Aalto and Siza are unmistakably Modernist in their work, the German architect Heinz Bienefeld (1926-1995) used ordinary face bricks and tiled roofs to produce extraordinarily timeless, practical and contextually-convincing architecture, achieving precisely the “level of abstraction” to which Rapoport refers. Both the plan form and the aesthetic wrapping can be derived from vernacular sources, and they do not have to be aligned. The former reveals how the household wishes to inhabit domestic space, and the latter asserts the households desired public identity.

It is important to accept that vernacular imagery (the aesthetic dimension) is subservient to its spatial organisation (the behavioural dimension). Considering just how inappropriate the model for the provision of low-income housing in South Africa is, in spite of the local vernacular being a spatial product with a long and responsive lineage, it is paradoxical that conceptual solutions exist elsewhere that simply need to be imported and unfolded (figure 11).

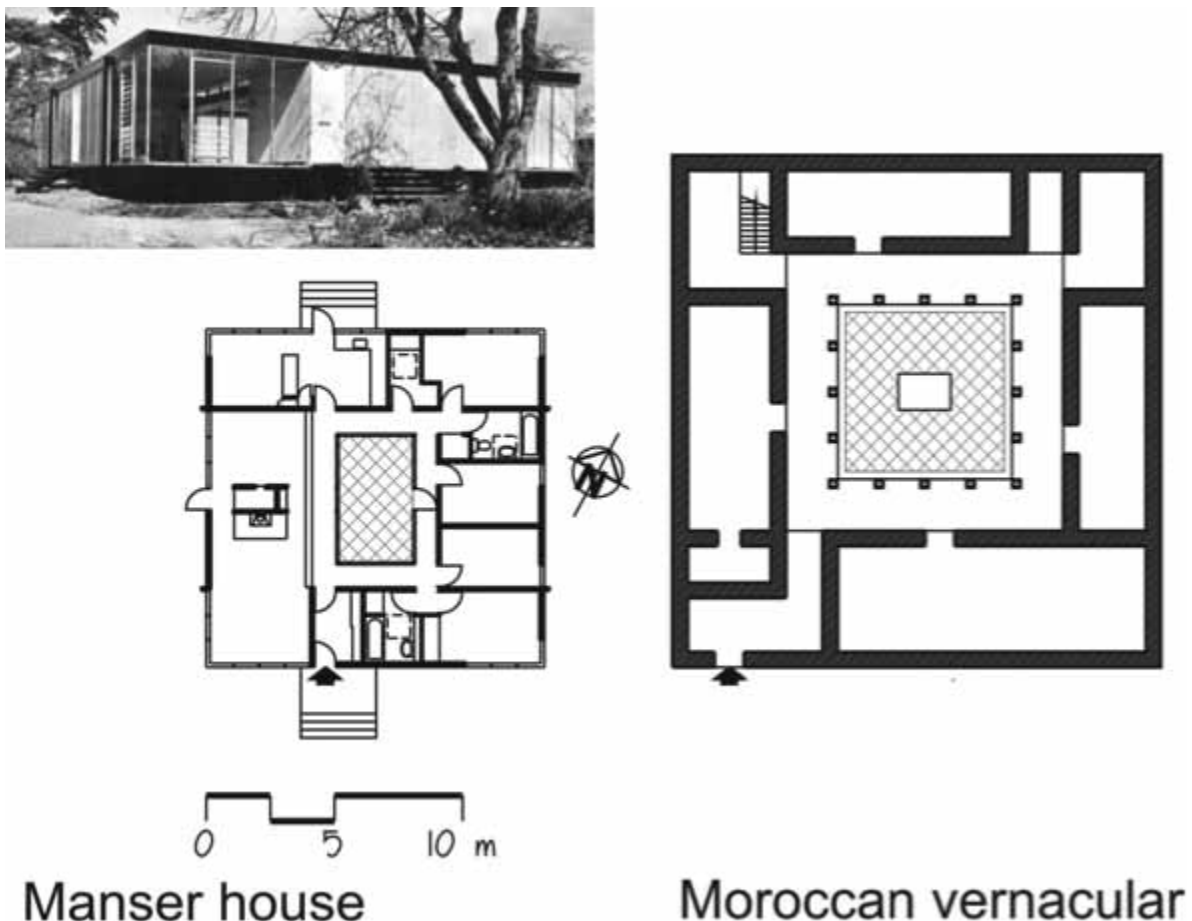


Figure 10
Michael Manser’s plan compared with a classic North African courtyard plan
 (source: drawing by the author).

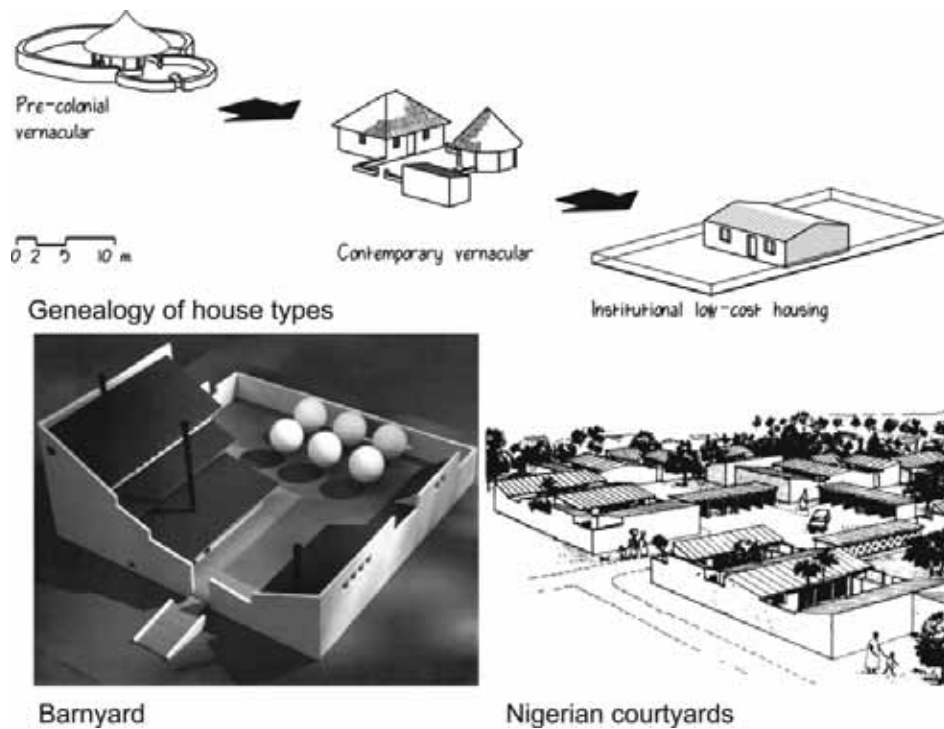


Figure 11

The inappropriateness of low-cost housing in southern Africa, and concepts worth exploring (sources: drawing by the author; barnyard from *The Harvard Architecture Review* 1980: 247; Nigerian courtyards from Saini 1979: 96).

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that vernacular elements were, generally, clumsily applied during the Post-Modern era, due simply to the fact that architects often derived their inspiration from images only, and without any understanding, or appreciation, of the spatial significance. Critical Regionalism, with its purported focus on climate, geography and culture has fared somewhat better, arguably because it takes a more analytical approach.

As Britz and Scholes, and Stauch Vorster plainly demonstrate, lessons from the vernacular may certainly augment a purely programmatic and contextual analysis in a very positive way. In both instances the architects applied conceptual solutions developed over an extended period, even if they were from another locality and time, or even embedded in another culture. The result was architecture that has the rare distinction of being lauded by the profession and appreciated by the users/inhabitants and the public.

Considering the vast extent of the vernacular as a source of ideas and formative concepts, and its potential to create identity of place and people in a world increasingly characterised by universal architecture, it makes sense to move vernacularism from the fringes of architectural training and fully incorporate it into the scholarship of and research on architectural theory, history and precedent. More helpful than detailed knowledge of the wide range of traditions, would be a general overview and proficiency in analytical methods. With proper insight and information, combined with sensitivity and humility, the worst excesses of the Tuscan phenomenon could possibly have been averted.

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