

VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE in the PRE-COLUMBIAN AMERICAS

Edited by
Christina T. Halperin
and Lauren E. Schwartz

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Vernacular Architecture in the Pre-Columbian Americas

Vernacular Architecture in the Pre-Columbian Americas reveals the dynamism of the ancient past, where social relations and long-term history were created posthole by posthole, brick by brick. This collection shifts attention away from the elite and monumental architectural traditions of the region to instead investigate the creativity, subtlety and variability of common architecture and the people who built and dwelled within it. At the heart of this study of vernacular architecture is an emphasis on ordinary people and their built environments, and how these everyday spaces were pivotal in the making and meaning of social and cultural dynamics.

Providing a deeper and more nuanced temporal perspective of common buildings in the Americas, the editors have deftly framed a study that highlights sociocultural diversity while at the same time facilitating broader comparative conversations around the theme of vernacular architecture. With diverse case studies covering a broad range of periods and regions, *Vernacular Architecture in the Pre-Columbian Americas* is an important addition to the growing body of scholarship on the indigenous architecture of the Americas and is a key contribution to our archaeological understandings of past built environments.

Christina T. Halperin is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the Université de Montréal, Canada. She is a specialist in Maya archaeology and has published a number of papers and books, with her research focusing on the household, political economy, gender, materiality and daily life.

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Part I

Introduction



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1 The archaeology of vernacular architecture in the Pre-Columbian Americas

Christina T. Halperin and Lauren E. Schwartz

Vernacular architecture is both everywhere and nowhere, and vernacular architecture of the Pre-Columbian Americas is no exception. At the heart of a study of vernacular architecture is an emphasis on ordinary people and their built environments. As Amos Rapoport (1969:2) estimates, about 95 percent of the world's built environment is vernacular. And yet common peoples' homes and buildings are so ubiquitous and omnipresent that we sometimes fail to 'see' them, to think about their variation, to appreciate their technology and aesthetics, and to consider the relationship between architecture and the people who construct, inhabit, and utilize them.

While the use of the term 'vernacular architecture' tends to be associated with the fields of architectural theory, architectural history, art history, cultural anthropology, folk studies, and geography, this book explores vernacular evaluations from the perspective of the archaeology of the Pre-Columbian Americas. It is perhaps ironic that when synthetic works on vernacular architecture include Pre-Columbian buildings, they mention the monumental constructions of the ancient world, such as the cut stone masonry pyramids and ballcourts of Mesoamerica or the elaborate palaces, plazas, and public buildings of the Andean region (Blier 2006:232, 238, 242; Crouch and Johnson 2001; Rudofsky 1964:7–8). Such a focus is not surprising since most formal studies of Pre-Columbian architecture elaborate on the grandest and most elaborate of buildings. Often built of non-perishable materials, these constructions tend to have a more enduring presence in the landscape. In turn, it is the elite and monumental architectural traditions of the ancient past that are overwhelmingly targeted today for protection, conservation, and reconsolidation.

This volume shifts our attention from these canonical and monumental buildings to investigate the creativity, subtlety, and variability of common architecture and the people who built and dwelled in them. The chapters build on a long history of archaeological research that considers ordinary buildings, most notably settlement pattern studies, household archaeology, landscape studies, and investigations of the social uses of space. The contributions in this volume, however, more pointedly take ordinary architecture as their center of analysis and, in many cases, explicitly draw from vernacular architecture studies outside the field of archaeology as frameworks for thinking about how the everyday was pivotal in the making and meaning of social and cultural dynamics. In turn, this compilation advances the field of vernacular architecture by providing a deeper and more nuanced temporal perspective of common buildings.

Rather than serving as a comprehensive or encyclopedic overview of vernacular traditions throughout all of the Pre-Columbian Americas, the chapters feature case studies from select time periods and regions. They include foci on the Mississippian period in the U.S. Southeast (Alt); the Chacoan period (850–1140 CE) in the U.S. Southwest (Throgmorton); the Postclassic period (900–1521 CE) in the Basin of Mexico (De Lucia); the Classic to Postclassic period transition (800–1100 CE) in the Maya area (Halperin); the Late to Terminal Classic period in northwest Honduras (Schwartz); the Middle Horizon Wari occupation of the Moquegua Valley of Peru (ca. 600–1000 CE) (Nash); part of the Late Intermediate period (1200–1450 CE) in the Chachapoya region of northeastern Peru (Guengerich); and late occupation (1300–1530 CE) in the Tumbes region in northwestern Peru (Moore) (Figure 1.1). Examples are drawn from ‘complex societies’ with institutionalized social hierarchies in order to provide contrasts with monumental or elite architectural forms if desired, although not every contributor drew on such comparisons as frameworks for analysis. Indeed, each case study provides a different perspective and makes use of varied analytical approaches to the study of Pre-Columbian vernacular architecture.

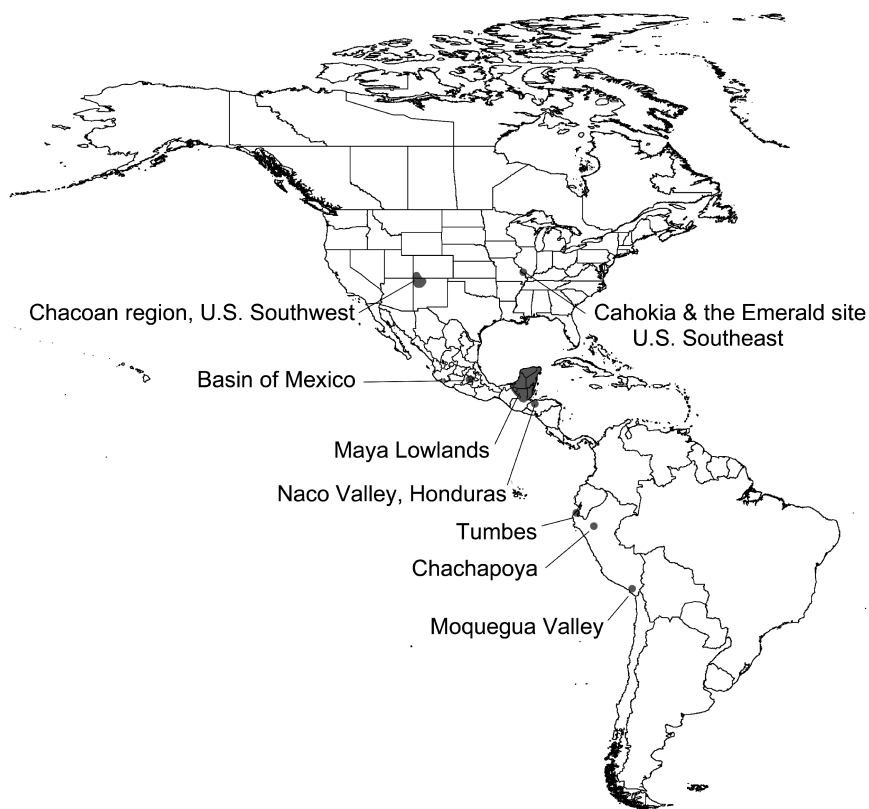


Figure 1.1 Map of the Americas showing locations of case studies mentioned in the volume.

Unlike vernacular architecture studies outside the field of archaeology, archaeological analyses must often rely on partial remains of ancient buildings. With most of the perishable roofs and walls having long disappeared, archaeologists focus on stone and earthen foundations of buildings, low wall foundations, floor treatments, postholes, daub, and other residues to identify, reconstruct, and analyze ancient buildings. In turn, ethnographic cases of perishable houses, ethnohistoric texts, and ancient imagery help round out the archaeological data to inform how ancient buildings may have looked. Thus, while artistic reconstructions of ancient buildings are helpful to visualize archaeological data, they are a combination of empirical archaeological data and informed interpretation (Figure 1.2).

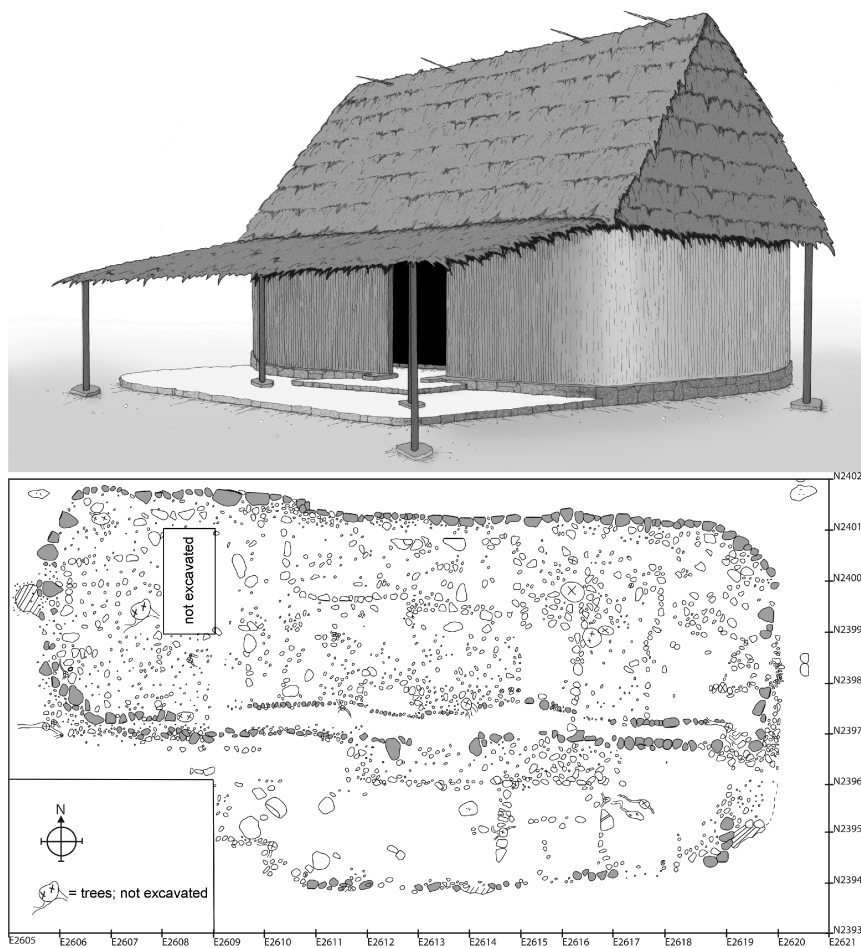


Figure 1.2 Reconstruction drawing based on plan of archaeological house foundation after excavations, Terminal Classic (ca. 800–950 CE) Maya residential building, Structure T267A, Tayasal, Guatemala.

Flexible definitions

Despite the volume's engagement with vernacular architecture studies outside the field of archaeology, its Pre-Columbian focus necessarily leaves behind some of the earlier 20th-century frameworks of vernacular studies. Some of these early works underscored a romantic longing for traditional architecture in the face of capitalism, industrialism, and modernism. In these studies, definitions of vernacular architecture emphasized the primitive, traditional, pre-industrial, and rural as counterpoints to the developed, urban, and modern (Deetz 1996:125–186; Oliver 1987; Rapoport 1969; Rudofsky 1964; Upton and Vlach 1986:xv–xvii; Vellinga 2011). Some approaches more explicitly examined the technologies of industrialization (and lack thereof) with vernacular architecture defined as buildings constructed using simple, non-industrial tools as well as locally available raw materials. In turn, vernacular architecture as 'an architecture without architects' (formal designers, specialized labor forces) highlighted the role of economic specialization, the emergence of capitalist workforces, and those 'left out' of such processes. A Pre-Columbian focus with its temporal range anytime before the 16th century, however, sidesteps the simplistic and oft-criticized temporal binary of 'traditional' and 'modern.' This is, of course, not to say that Pre-Columbian peoples did not have their own understandings of the past or did not create their own representations of the 'traditional,' as discussed further in the chapter.

More recently, scholars have situated their definitions of the vernacular using concepts of the ordinary, popular, informal, and non-elite. These analytical categories largely suit Pre-Columbian societies, and many of the contributions herein take them as their starting points. We feel, however, that the definitions of vernacular architecture must necessarily remain open and flexible to fit the historical contexts and types of questions posed. Such flexibility is exemplified in Henry Glassie's assertion that the concept of vernacular architecture

marks the transition from the unknown to the known. The study of vernacular architecture is a way that we expand the record, bit by bit. At work, moving toward a complete view of the builder's art, we bring buildings into scrutiny and toward utility in the comprehensive study of humankind.
(Glassie 2000:20)

In other words, the term does not designate a particular 'form' immutable across space and time, but as an analytical lens for thinking about poorly known or previously forgotten architecture. Here we seek to elucidate some examples of everyday, domestic, popular, and ordinary Pre-Columbian buildings and place them in their social and historical contexts.

In organizing this volume, we did not impose a single definition on the contributing authors. Instead the contributors present slightly different yet overlapping takes on the 'vernacular.' For Donna Nash, the vernacular is identified in terms of local architectural traditions, which clash or make compromises with

more invasive imperial Wari architecture. Susan Alt examines the vernacular in its reference to – and creation of – tradition. For both Christina Halperin and Kellam Throgmorton, the vernacular is seen as a popular architecture that contrasts, but was also in discourse with elite and monumental buildings. Indeed, most contributions (Moore, De Lucia, and Schwartz) focus on vernacular architecture as non-monumental domestic architecture. Yet, as Alt's and Halperin's case studies reveal, ritual structures may also belong to vernacular traditions, and as Anna Guengerich's study underscores, even ordinary domestic buildings can be monumental.

Ancient peoples and their buildings

One of the overarching emphases of the volume is that vernacular architecture is not just a study of the physical remains of buildings. Rather it is just as much about the people who built and dwelled in and around them. As such, it shies away from conceptions of vernacular architecture as anonymous, since it is through these very buildings that we seek to know people of the past. While in many cases architecture may reflect the social identities, technological know-how, and cultural dispositions of its builders and inhabitants, we also underscore the recursive relationship between people and their material constructions, and in turn, how social groups relate to each other and their landscapes through their architecture.

Even as far back as Lewis Henry Morgan's (1965 [1881]) *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines*, a study of houses has given us a sense of the people who built and lived in them. Morgan, who pored over the few available documentary and archaeological accounts of architecture of his time, was particularly interested in the communal social and economic relations that were forged through the physicality of the house (e.g. size, layout, number of hearths, organization of space) as well as through the practices conducted within them. Despite his classification of societies into stages of cultural evolution (from savagery to barbarism to civilization), Morgan argued that many Pre-Columbian societies at different 'stages' practiced a similar type of communal social organization where multiple families lived in the same house or house complex. These societies included the Iroquois of the U.S. Northeast, the ancient Pueblo peoples of the U.S. Southwest, and the ancient cultures of Mexico, whose architectural traditions were quite varied.

Since Morgan's work, archaeologists studying households continued to investigate house forms, sizes, and layouts to understand social organization, kinship, and household composition, especially as it related to agricultural and economic intensification (Flannery 1972; Gilman 1987; Wilk and Netting 1984). Archaeologists have also examined ordinary architecture alongside state and ceremonial works as one of the principal means of assessing the emergence of social complexity and relations of inequality. These studies include assessments of architectural labor investments, house sizes, segmentation of space, and building materials and techniques to identify an unequal access to extra-familial

labor and the emergence or degree of social complexity (Abrams 1994; Kent 1990; Lesure and Blake 2002; Shaw 1992; Tourtellot et al. 1992; Trubitt 2000; Willey and Leventhal 1979). Such a focus differs from vernacular architecture studies working in historic and contemporary periods, which have often treated such status distinctions as self-evident rather than as a topic of inquiry (cf. Colloredo-Mansfeld 1994; Wilk 1983). Nonetheless, there is considerable overlap in and out of the field of archaeology in examining architecture as expressions of regionalism, ethnicity, and community origins (Aldenderfer 1993; Cameron 1998; Stanish 1989; Upton 1996; Upton and Vlach 1986). In this volume, Guengerich (Chapter 3) examines how social status in the community of Monte Viudo, Peru, was negotiated through the quality of stonework, elevation, and the implementation of design motifs on houses. Differing from earlier cultural evolutionary approaches concerned with identifying a society's level of social complexity (e.g. chiefdoms vs. states), her analyses of architectural distinctions serve to 'people' the community of Monte Viudo and better understand the subtle sources and reflections of social diversity.

The idea of peopling the past has been a foundational pillar of household archaeology (Hendon 1996, 2007; Tringham 1996). The study of households narrows the lens through which one can assess larger social, political, economic, environmental, and cultural patterns. In turn, it identifies social change not as a product of externally determining forces, but as enacted in variable ways by men, women, children, and their families, kin-groups, neighborhoods, and communities (Brumfiel 1992; Hendon 2007; Varien and Porter 2008; Yaeger and Canuto 2000). As many have pointed out, however, households are not synonymous with houses (Blanton 1994; Morgan 1965; Netting 1984): household members may extend across several physical structures or even over different geographical regions while multiple households as well as both kin and non-kin groups may share the same physical house. As a result, early household archaeology studies tended to focus on what households *do*, such as the coordinated tasks of production, distribution, and reproduction (Ashmore and Wilk 1988; Gonlin and Douglass 2012; Wilk and Netting 1984; Wilk and Rathje 1982). Many of these studies focused on the practices of crafting, agriculture, subsistence regimes, goods dissemination, and social relations, with less attention devoted to architecture.

A concerted interest in ordinary architecture was also largely missing from some of the earliest house society approaches in archaeology (Gillespie 2000; Joyce and Gillespie 2000; cf. Beck 2007; Hutson et al. 2004). Taking inspiration from Claude Lévi-Strauss's house societies, house society studies focus on households as corporate bodies reproduced through co-residence and the maintenance of an estate comprised of both material (e.g. architecture, goods) and immaterial (e.g. titles, legacies) wealth. These early analyses often centered on burials, heirlooms, and portable goods rather than on architectural features, constructions, and styles. Despite this lacuna, house society studies recognized the materiality of the archaeological record whereby social groups defined themselves in and through their buildings and material objects.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, we outline how a materiality of vernacular architecture manifests as the building of buildings and structuring of structures, together seen as two sides of the same coin. This relationship between people and their buildings, however, cannot be understood without a third dimension, the temporality of vernacular architecture, which underscores the dynamism and uneven temporal scales by which people changed and were changed by their houses, shrines, and built environments.

Building buildings

One of the key dimensions in the study of any type of material culture is through the process of production. Vernacular architecture studies outside the field of archaeology have long examined the technological and environmental know-how of builders, the types of collaborations involved in construction, the social and cultural dispositions of the people who build houses, and other aspects of building buildings. Fewer archaeological studies, however, have examined production processes for ordinary architecture.

For example, while large-scale collaborative or coerced relationships of building buildings are relatively self-evident for monumental and elite Pre-Columbian architecture, those of ordinary architecture may be more subtle. In fact, it is often assumed that common people's homes were built by the buildings' owners. Vernacular architectural studies have underscored, however, that this is only partly the case in actual practice. Rather, vernacular buildings helped reproduce relationships between an owner (or set of owners) and a network of friends, extended family members, neighbors, and at times master masons as they build a building together (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1994:846–847; Dietler and Herbich 1998:259; Glassie 2000:40–52; Oliver 1987:66–71; Moore, Chapter 2 in this volume). Among the Batammaliba of Western Africa who build earthen two-story houses, for instance, part-time architects (*otammali*) work alongside a house owner and his family (Blier 1987:18–31). The owner and his family complete the less specialized tasks, such as gathering the materials for construction and the loading of earth for wall formation. Such a relationship is reinforced through the construction of two shrines within the house compound, one for the house owner's deceased elder and the other for the architect's deceased elder.

In an archaeological case study, Pauketat and Alt (2005:220) found evidence for collaborative work parties responsible for the construction and renovation of wooden and thatch house groups at the Halliday site, a Mississippian (1050–1350 CE) hinterland village near Cahokia, Illinois. They found that the depths of nearly 3,000 postholes used to construct 101 houses were consistently variable, suggesting to them that multiple people, including both adults and children, helped with house construction. Since the buildings from the same house groups were all renovated at the same time, they argue that such renovations were likely undertaken as coordinated work parties. Similarly, Guengerich (Chapter 3) suggests that the building of the masonry and thatch houses from

Monte Viudo, Peru, depended not only on the founding family, but also on variable kin and non-kin social networks.

Despite the fact that less archaeological research is devoted to the processes of making ordinary, humble buildings, a great body of work has developed in relation to the production of artifacts, where ceramic vessels, lithics, shell, metals, and textiles have been examined in relation to technological styles, *chaîne opératoires*, communities of practice, and *techné*, among other analytical approaches. These studies underscore that the practices of making material things are both reflective and constitutive of culture and social identity (Dobres 1999, 2000). Studies of technological style, for instance, underscore that production is not a single event, but a process or *chaîne opératoire* whereby multiple, often linked, choices must be made along the way. These choices are reflective not just of the constraints in the availability of raw materials, but of the values, worldviews, and dispositions of the artisans and builders (Lechtman 1977; Lemonnier 1992; Stark 1998). The shared knowledge and skills of artisans develop as part of *communities of practice* where artisans and builders share social space, and ongoing practices influence, are transmitted, or are conducted in concert with one another (Hendon 2010; Wendrich 2012). The consideration of the acts of production in addition to the finished form, decorative features, choices of color, and so forth reveal that artifact and architectural styles not only signal key messages about identity (Blanton 1994; Conkey and Hastorf 1993; Hegmon 1992; Sackett 1982; Wobst 1977), but also embody and recreate cultural and social dispositions, worldviews, and values (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Dietler and Herbich 1998).

In architectural terms, these material–social relationships have sometimes been identified as *architectural grammars*, patterns of material expression that follow and create particular norms, values, and practices (Ashmore 1989, 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002; Glassie 1975; Lewis and Stout 1998; Schwartz 2013). While many of these studies, including Glassie's (1975) seminal publication, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*, focus on building form and layout (see also Halperin Chapter 6, Nash Chapter 5, and Schwartz Chapter 4), other production techniques and dispositions are also informative even if they were largely invisible to those who inhabited and passed through the buildings (see for example Hansen 1998, Hastings and Moseley 1975, and Sherwood and Kidder 2011 for monumental architecture). Just as the joints of timber–framed vernacular buildings from the colonial Americas and England (Johnson 2010; Kniffen and Glassie 1987) may have gone largely unnoticed, the distinctive fill techniques of ancient buildings were invisible to those living in them. Nonetheless, fill techniques from the Recuay site of Yayno, Peru, reveal two possible communities of builders: those who built the larger household compounds by laying foundation stones in an interlocking fashion at right angles with smaller rubble fill placed between the stonework, and those who built terrace room complexes and other smaller domestic buildings by mounding up unsorted rubble stones (Lau 2010:337; see also Gijseghem 2001 for Moche residences).

The type of knowledge and skills of vernacular builders need not always be poorer or lesser developed than those commissioned to construct elite complexes and monumental works. Archaeologists have turned to the concept of