

**International Studies in Vernacular Architecture**  
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**Integrative and Global Studies**  
**The Global School Worcester Polytechnic Institute, USA**  
**Lecture 11**  
**Cultural Geography and Vernacular Architecture**

Hi, everyone. I am Melissa Belz. I am a graduate of the International Studies in vernacular architecture program at Oxford Brookes University. I hold a Ph D in Geography and I work in the Integrative and Global Studies Department at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in the US. I am here today to talk to you about cultural geography. In our first module of that unit, focused on how cultural geography has explored the vernacular house.

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The slide is titled "Cultural Geography I" and contains the following content:

- Gain an understanding of the discipline in relation to vernacular architecture
- Understand how the house has been studied over time
- Understand where the study of vernacular architecture has landed today across disciplines

Illustrations on the right side of the slide include:

- Mid-West: A two-story house with a gabled roof.
- Shotgun: A long, narrow house with a gabled roof.
- Bungalow: A single-story house with a low-pitched roof.

At the bottom right, there is a small video inset showing a woman (Melissa Belz) speaking in front of a house.

The slide footer includes logos for Swagati and a small number '2' followed by a hash symbol '#'. There is also a small '2' in the bottom right corner of the slide content area.

My goal in this lecture is to help you gain an understanding of the discipline of cultural geography in relation to the study of the vernacular architecture and understand how the house has been studied over time, in that discipline and also where the study of the vernacular house has landed across disciplines. Paul Oliver and others have stated that studies investigating vernacular architecture are at the convergence of several disciplines, including architecture, art, history, geography and anthropology.

I will be sharing geographic studies of the vernacular house primarily American, but because of the interdisciplinarity of vernacular architecture studies, I will also discuss work of scholars from other disciplines such as architecture and planning to highlight a geographic approach to studying the house.


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### Cultural Geography



#### Central Place Theory

- The way phenomena exist across space
- The way places change in relation to influences including migration, population change, climate change, or economics



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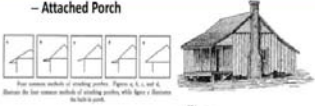
First, I had like to define geography for you. Geographers study the way that phenomena exist across space and they study the way places change in relation to certain influences including migration, population change, climate change, or economics. Geographic studies can focus on urban or rural regions, they can look at development or even human behavior or physical characteristics of the earth. Almost anything can be studied with a geographic lens and would normally assess how something has dispersed spatially or how it leaves an imprint on the landscape.

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### The house as the object of study


- The elementary unit of the landscape
- The Key to understanding all other elements including culture and social order
- The central reference point of human existence
- Traditional societies place more value of group identity and uniformity

— Attached Porch




Four common methods of attaching porches. Figures 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8 illustrate the four common methods of attaching porches with Figure 4.6 showing the basic porch.


— Porchless



— Open Passage



Open passage from outside to inside.



© Open source Fred Kriffen

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The house has been a mainstay of study and cultural geography for over 100 years. American landscape scholar JB Jackson declared study of the dwelling as the most important task of the


human geographer, Jackson considered the dwelling to be the elementary unit on the landscape, and by far the most significant manmade feature on it. Jackson said it is the key to understanding all other elements on the landscape, including culture and social order. Other geographers have called the house the central reference point of human existence, a social product, and a cultural institution.

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### The house as the object of study

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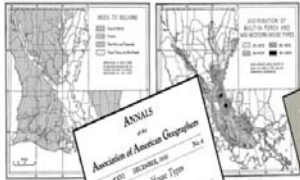





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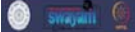
Vernacular houses show great repetition and design, particularly in traditional and remote settings, where value is placed on homogeneity, and group identity is more important than individual distinction. The traditional uniformity and house type creates a sense of belonging to a community, and in that way, it is critical for cultural identity.

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### Early Vernacular Studies

- Early content was diffusion of the object
- Focused on description and region


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Before the 1960's, much of human geography was devoted to describing the differences between places, areas and regions, known as the choreographic approach seen in these maps, the goal was a complete understanding of the Earth's surface represented regionally through particular phenomena, which could be the house or dress, religion, or politics.

Early sales of cultural geography in America in the 1930's and 1940's saw that the greatest potential contribution of the house was in distinguishing cultural regions by house type to describe where a certain style and a culture spread, leading to a long history of diffusionist studies or works that study house type limited by and focused primarily on region.

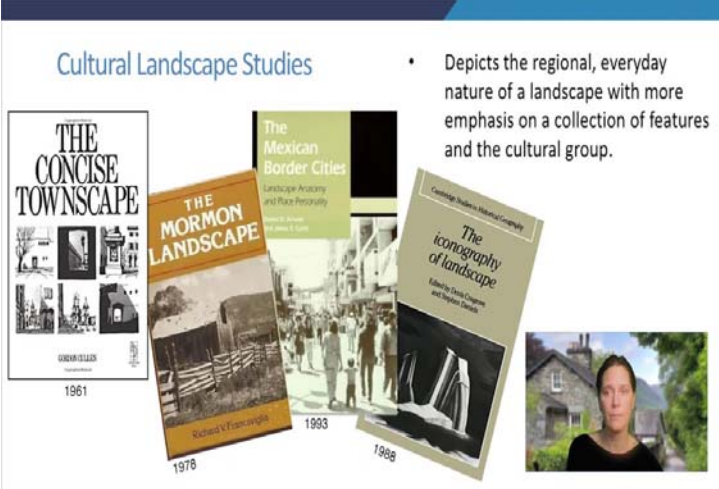
The well-known work of Fred Kniffin exemplified the early stage that delimited a regional house type, with no added understanding of the reasons for its being or the culture that used it. His work described the important characteristics of Louisiana house types and demonstrated that the house is an element worthy of study in and of itself, but portrayed the house as isolated from the people who use it. The thinking is that the study of vernacular architecture was inhibited through these early decades of study, and work that has been criticized as overly descriptive, lacking connection to culture or the future and disregarding the concept of change.

But documentation is important. We should not necessarily abandon description and detailed documentation, because it has provided important evidence of styles that no longer exist. But study should also include stronger analytical backing, we should be addressing questions in our studies.

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Cultural Landscape Studies

- Depicts the regional, everyday nature of a landscape with more emphasis on a collection of features and the cultural group.



1961

1978

1993

1986

#

A lot of later work in the 70's still focused on a defined area, which predominantly included the rural landscape. But it put increasing emphasis on society and the cultural landscape, which is a critical term in cultural geography. It is often interchangeable with vernacular landscape, which depicts the regional everyday nature of a landscape. But with some emphasis on the collection of features.

You can see from the titles, townscape and Mexican border cities that the emphasis went beyond just the house. Also, a focus on change and urban environments and complexities of class were increasingly common. A well-known detailed study in the American Mormon vernacular landscape, determined that significant landscape features that define the cultural region and help identify Mormon settlements based on homestyle, style of agricultural buildings and tools, and town layout and features such as open irrigation ditches.

It made the point that a town does not have to have every one of these features in repetition. But it is more likely to be a Mormon town with increased occurrences of these landscape features. Features that can also be found in non-Mormon towns. Geographers began to acknowledge that dwellings are tangible cultural forms, and their strengths as subjects of study goes much beyond just their location. This work helps lay the path first the study of whole landscapes and an emphasis on a set of features.

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**Landscape Characteristics: Small-scale**

**MEXICAN AMERICAN HOUSESCAPES\***  
DANIEL H. ARRIOLA

**THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL THEORY: TOWARDS AN ARCHITECTURAL GEOGRAPHY?**  
Jan Gou

The study moved towards a focus on landscape analysis, distinctive features and social groups or society rather than regions. So, it could look at fences and vegetation, wood storage practices that are particular to a certain group, these all became important components for

understanding the people who lived in a house and its function. Many architectural changes that take place there are opportunities for observation on the small scale, meaning railings, fences, window trim, painting patterns, yard ornamentation. This is often the scale that cultural geographers could focus on.

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When changes take place on the large scale to the house form the major construction materials, the scale of the house, these changes tend to have a much larger effect on the landscape. And on place change, since geographers study how and why places change, the large-scale changes to the house are meaningful indicators of cultural change. Amos Rapaport, who was not a geographer, but he is central in the study of vernacular architecture, describe the house as a fixed feature element. Fixed features changed slowly or rarely due to their size. Because houses and traditional societies are commonly owner built and owner controlled. They are more culturally specific and less arbitrary.

Therefore, the vernacular fabric is highly identifiable and often changes greatly between regions that have different identities. Geographers began to study the process of adaptation in the house and also looked farther to understand the underlying social change that was being reflected, arguing that major change in the look of a cultural landscape very likely reflects a major change occurring in the nation, or at least the regional culture.

On the left in this image, you see a wooden vernacular house in Himachal Pradesh, India. It is next to a contemporary version of a house. It has very little indication of place as you can barely see the roof trim. There is detail along the edge of the eaves that similar to the historic

house, the singular detail that tries to tie it to its place. And we will look more at this type of architecture in our next lecture.

On the right, you see a current day a very arbitrary set of houses in the United States. They are not owner built, they are not representative of any region or culture. They are developed by a company without concern for the people or place and could be in any region. When changes take place at this level, on the large scale to the house form, the only option left for showing identity is transferred to the small-scale level of ornamentation.

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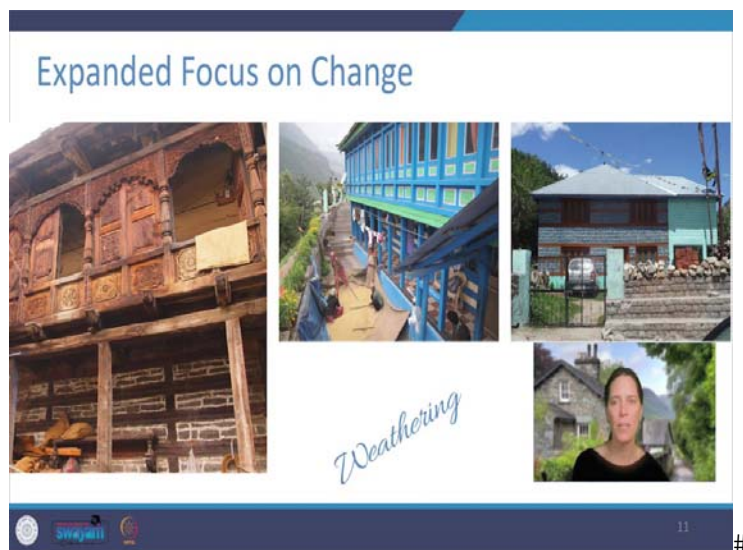
It became clear that studies have to incorporate how houses change, and how they blend with migration or globalization. Scholars show that connections to architecture are reinforced through collective processes of change so that houses meet the needs of a new culture and stay viable for future generations.

Several scholars argue that features maintain meaning or become more meaningful, because they changed and because they retained to function. When features are transferable enough and work with a new accepted norm, the trade is more likely to expand, especially if it is small scale and adaptable. On the left, and these images, you see historic window, transom carving, it is in the Caribbean, and it is common to many houses.

In the middle is a modernized glass etching that tries to convey the same small-scale detail of this transom even with a completely different material. The building is a large-scale condo. The form is completely different from the vernacular house, but the small-scale feature helps maintain a connection to the place into the history.

The black and white image here is from Kingston Heath patina of place, you see a metal railing in the front yard and on the upper porch. He is showing that the new Portuguese immigrants to Massachusetts change the common wooden railing to better represent what they know from their homelands, changing the vernacular and showing their identity through this small-scale feature, which was adaptable to a readymade house that did not represent their history. Oftentimes, processes of adapting the house on the small scale ensures that it will continue to reflect the identity of the inhabitants.

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## Expanded Focus on Change



*Creolization*

## Expanded Focus on Change



*Hybridity*

## Expanded Focus on Change



*Fusion*



If features are not easily transferable, or do not retain a function for the new generation, they are likely to disappear on them, one of the major findings that emerged in cultural geography was the process of simplifying trait complexes, or sets of features of the house in order to cope with stress. Stresses can be brought on by habitat or climate change, changing cultural norms, loss of access to materials such as wood and changes brought on by migration. This results in changes to preexisting vernacular. These are images of houses around the Sangla in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, India. You can see the earliest house on the left has detailed carving, which is slowly lost through the years of house change.

There is also an overhang of the upper floor, which later deepened to a ground floor porch. In in more contemporary construction, the porch is enclosed into living space as needs have changed. The house is certainly different now. But the story of the changes is also very interesting and tells a lot about the people who live there. Part of the problem with early vernacular architecture studies is that it tried its study different the vernacular house as if no conflict has surrounded the choices and alternatives of the house.

In fact, choices are made continually and the house is adapted and modernized and hybrid studies are valuable if we are also trying to capture the story of the society, along with a description of the house. What is called for now in cultural geography and vernacular architecture studies is a conscious focus on the modifications to vernacular designs and adaptations to new circumstances. The idea of timelessness is the paradigm that holds vernacular landscape back into a stigmatized perspective, where house forms and landscapes are relegated to the past, inconsequential for the future.

If people think that they cannot adapt and cannot be lived in contemporarily, blending, weathering, creolization, hybridity, fusion, and vernacularization are all terms that appear repeatedly in contemporary writings and refer to new, locally chosen forms created through modification. Through adaptation, and by embracing new representations that appeal to younger generations, the connection to vernacular traditions will be maintained by the people who value them.

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Cultural Landscape Approach

- Move the emphasis in preservation from monuments to everyday landscapes, involve the community.
- Can better integrate intangible heritage.

*Managing Cultural Landscapes*, edited by Ken Taylor and Jane L. Lennon, London: Routledge, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-4156-7225-2

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Now, that we have talked about what to look for in the landscape, I want to circle back around to why we should care about the cultural landscape holistically. In cultural geography, there is an emphasis on how much the house is embedded in the larger landscape. In the world of architecture, everyday landscapes are generally undervalued. Because of the emphasis on great monuments, archaeological sites, the preservation of select grand buildings, surrounding villages often faced demolition or neglect. The book managing cultural landscapes challenges this established framework and is worth pointing out for its focus on living landscapes, including ordinary rural and urban settings.

It articulates a practice or an approach to management and development. Embedded in this framework is the maintenance of traditional skills and knowledge or respect for landscape change and involvement of local people in all stages of planning, execution and management. The contributors consider this paradigm shift in the way we approach landscapes in preservation planning, and call for increased consideration of landscape components and conscious decision making on what the landscape can be. And so, preserving isolated


buildings may not have the same long-term effect, as making sure a full living landscape is available for people.

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### Cultural Geography and Vernacular Architecture



- The way phenomena exist across space
- The way places change
- Fixed features and semi-fixed features
- Landscape characteristics and living landscapes



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### Cultural Geography and Vernacular Architecture Resources

Arreola, Daniel D. 1988. "Mexican American Housescapes." *Geographical Review* 78(3):299-315.


Arreola, Daniel D. and James R. Curtis. 1993. *The Mexican Border Cities: Landscape Anatomy and Place Personality*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

Asquith, Lindsay, and Marcel Vellinga, eds. 2006. Introduction to *Vernacular Architecture in the Twenty-First Century: Theory, Education and Practice*. 1-20. London; New York: Taylor & Francis.

Edwards, Jay. D. 2010 "Architectural Creolization." In *The Creolization Reader*. Edited by Robin Cohen and Paola Toninato, 219-234. New York: Routledge.

Edwards, Jay. D. 2008. "Unheralded Contributions Across the Atlantic World." *Atlantic Studies* 15(2):161-201.

Heath, Kingston Wm. 2001. *The Patina of Place: The Cultural Weathering of a New England Industrial Landscape*. Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press.



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Geographers have a long history of studying the house as a central element in the landscape. Scholars make it clear that vernacular architecture is a central process, a vital aspect of researching cultural norms, boundaries and identity. Houses are fixed features that change slowly. When they change on the large scale, they create great changes in the vernacular landscape. But small-scale features and ornamentation allow great opportunities for groups to maintain a connection to vernacular traditions, even amid stressors and the need for change. Because settlements have always evolved and will continue to do so. We can expect that many vernacular features will be modified as contexts ideals and values change.

This represents an opportunity to critically analyse the process of change in the vernacular home, and what it means for and about the place and the people. Remembering to look at the full landscape as a sum that is greater than its parts is a beneficial way to approach the study of vernacular buildings and settings. And we will look more at change in the next lecture, providing here a list of some references of geographers that focus on landscape change and changes to specific houses. Thanks.

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