

International Studies in Vernacular Architecture
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Lecture 12
Cultural Geography and Small-Scale Features in the Landscape

Hi everyone, this is Melissa Belz, I am bringing you the second lecture in cultural geography, which is going to focus more on small scale features in the landscape.

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The slide is titled "Recap of Cultural Geography I" and contains a bulleted list of four points: "Diffusion of house types", "House portrayed as an object of study", "Evolution to include culture and change", and "Focus on the larger cultural landscape". Below the text are several line drawings of different house styles with labels: "Yankee 'upright and wing'", "Yankee 'Cape Cod'", "Yankee New England 'Large'", "African-American 'shotgun' house", "Acadian 'Creole' house", "Upland southern log 'saddlebag' house, front view", "Upland southern log 'dogtrot' house", "Quebec French farmhouse" (with sub-labels: "Bellcast roof", "Door to cellar", "Summer kitchen wing", "Balcony porch", "Dormer windows"), and "Upper Canadian 'Ontario' farmhouse". A small photograph of a woman is visible in the bottom right corner of the slide. At the bottom left, there are logos for "Swigly" and "WPI". A small number "2" is in the bottom right corner of the slide area, followed by a hash symbol "#".

In the first lecture, I laid out that the vernacular house is a critical point of study in cultural geography, and outline the evolution of study from the description of an unadulterated vernacular house as a material object sort of detached from society and culture, to the study that embraces changes in the vernacular house as a reflection of a changing society. Cultural geography puts an emphasis on the cultural landscape and the distinctive features that surround the house.

In this lecture, I would like to elaborate on the importance of studying the landscape as a whole in the role of small-scale features within the vernacular house and the cultural landscape. I finish with research in India that explores how vernacular traditions with a higher number of small-scale features can be more likely to endure in a changing environment and why.

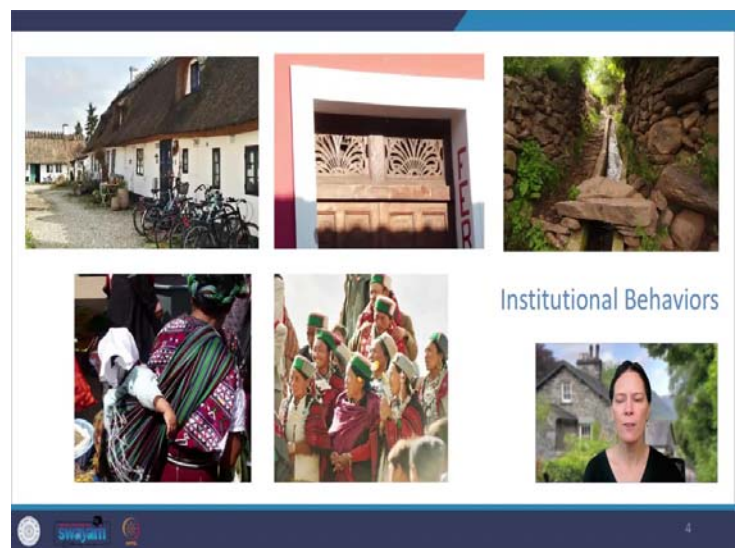
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Identifying signature features of the house and house scape, which is the larger area around the house has proven to be a useful method for interpreting a cultural landscape. In these images, the house scape would include the specific style of fence, the specific sort of vegetation that would be commonly found throughout New England in the left picture, the woods storage practices and the flags of the Spiti Valley. The setbacks and color patterns of the houses in Ecuador.

Geographers call these clusters of features ensembles, a selection of objects and their arrangement, which are recognized as a whole in form a part of a larger landscape. The key is that the whole tells us a story which the separate parts do not.

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Small scale features can highlight institutional behaviors repeated within a group and made visible on the house. Institutionalized behavior is a behavior that is completely ingrained in the culture and is adopted on a wide scale within a certain group. This can include architecture, but also food, dress, ceremonies, social norms, like having bicycles everywhere is part of the landscape. Institutionalized behavior patterns result when long standing cultural associations form.

The features are used in a subconscious process of group identification. Institutionalize behaviors tend to go unquestioned precisely because they are so ingrained, but they are not unnoticed.

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Institutionalized Behavior

- Process of group identification
- Produces cultural cohesion
- Tends to fade into background
- In housescapes it includes fences, colours, trim, etc.

The slide features four images illustrating institutionalized architectural behaviors: a stone house with white shutters, a house with a red roof and blue and red patterned shutters, a house with a grey tiled roof and yellow shutters, and a woman standing in front of a stone house.

Institutionalized behaviors matter, because they remind us that we are part of a group and they satisfy a fundamental human urge to belong. Mundane features such as fences, shutters, fascia details, or house color, actually create a landscape and influence our understanding of the landscape and the culture. And for those of us who study architecture, this encourages a deeper level of study.

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Fixed Features

- Form & building materials
- Large and change slowly
- Can be out of the owner's control

The slide features a large image of a traditional wooden house in India on the left. Below it are two smaller images: a classic Cape Cod house in Massachusetts and a modern grey house. A small video inset of a woman is in the bottom right corner. The slide footer includes the Swayam logo, the number 6, and a hash symbol.

In our last lecture, we discussed how fixed features like the vernacular house in traditional societies communicates a great deal of meaning and identity because its style emulates from within the group, and it changes slowly, like the wooden house in this picture in India, as well as the classic Cape Cod house in Massachusetts.

But once the mass scale and materials of the house change, a lot of the connection is lost. In modern societies rather than traditional societies, fixed features communicate less because people tend to move into readymade houses that are under the control of codes, regulations, and often designed for some outside aspiration of style and efficiency.

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Semi-Fixed Features

- Ornamentation, small details
- Yard decoration and fences
- Are mostly within the owner's control
- Communicate meaning

The slide features two images of a traditional Indian house: the exterior with a thatched roof and colorful wall decorations, and the interior showing a red door and patterned walls. A small video inset of a woman is in the bottom right corner. The slide footer includes the Swayam logo, the number 7, and a hash symbol.

Then, meaning is often better conveyed through semi fixed features or small-scale features of the house, including ornamentation, which can act independently on the house form and they change more easily. Here we see painting on a traditional Roundhouse in Gujarat, and its modernized rectangular version, the form is lost, but the house maintains reference to the original culture through ornamentation.

Therefore, semi fixed features take on a role of communication in modern or modernizing societies, where house form and materials have changed. This helps a neighbourhood to maintain identity or gradually acquire a new identity in the case of migration.

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The slide is titled "Semi-Fixed Features" in blue text. It contains two photographs of houses: the top one is a traditional roundhouse with a green-painted gable and a white fence, and the bottom one is a modernized rectangular house with a white facade and green window frames. To the right of the images is a bulleted list. In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a small video inset showing a woman speaking. The slide footer includes a logo, the text "Swayam", and a small number "8" followed by a hash symbol "#".

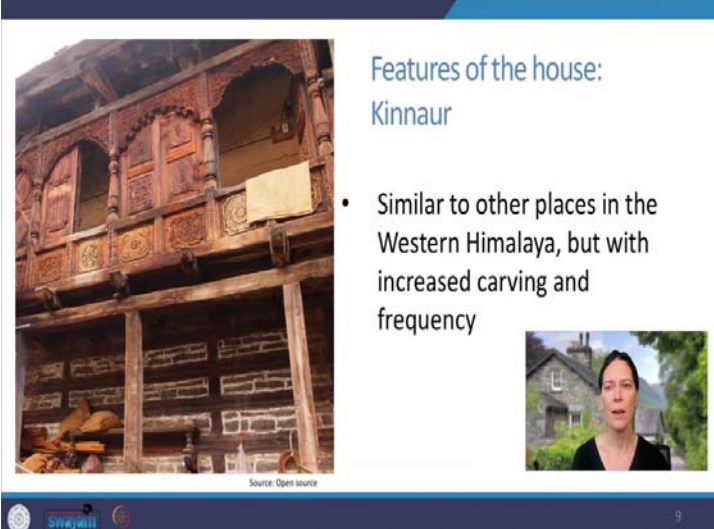
Semi-Fixed Features

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The power lies in the high representation and combination of select features that together create a visual impact on the landscape. It relies on repetition. Amos Rapaport makes the case that ensembles through his multi attribute approach, which states that no singular features enough to classify or disqualify a building typology from being vernacular, a larger number of attributes is needed, each need not be present in every example.

It is the relationship of the elements which create the overall character of a place, and the strength in the system of messages. This is similar to how Frank Aviglia explained the Mormon landscape, which might not have every feature in repetition. But the more often those traits are present, the more likely it is that the talent is Mormon. Or another way to look at it is that the more frequently the traits appear, the stronger the tie to the identity.

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Features of the house:
Kinnaur

- Similar to other places in the Western Himalaya, but with increased carving and frequency

Source: Open source

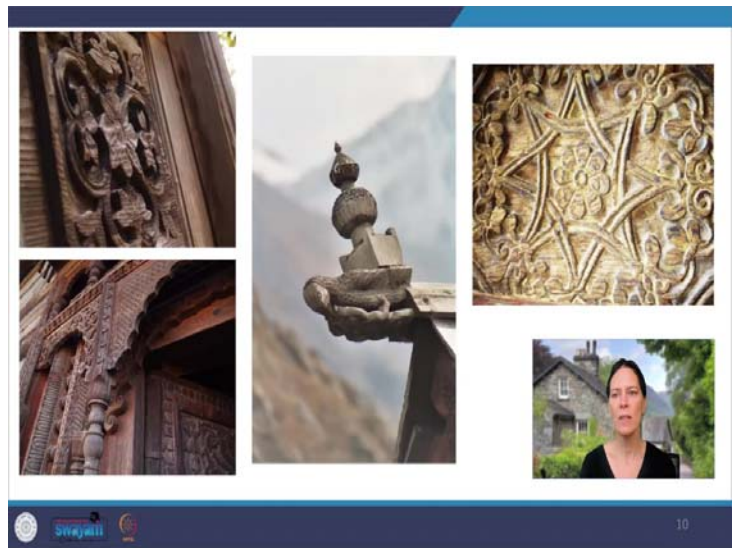
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I want to use this argument of ensembles or Rapoport's multi attribute approach with the example of the vernacular house in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, India, vernacular house at Kinnaur with its layered log construction is similar to many other simplified styles found throughout the western Himalaya that also use this layered log construction in a wooden upper story.

It is not entirely unique to the district of Kinnaur or the state of Himachal Pradesh. But in Kinnaur district, it is found with an increased amount of carving in greater concentration and with a higher occurrence of a select set of features. So, you might have personal experience with this house or this region having been there.

The common pattern of significant features used in specific and meaningful combinations creates an ensemble distinct to the region. It sorts of functions as an institutionalized behavior. Most Kinnaurist interviewed in my research, in the Kalpa region believe that this style is unique to their immediate district, and peripheral regions. And because of the high occurrence of the vernacular traits, or architectural style, the landscape still has a cohesive character.


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These are some examples of the common carving that is seen throughout the region. And you could see this on the temples as well as some of the simple houses. Of course, not all of the houses look the same. They are different ages. There are different levels of detail. Some are painted, some are not, but there is still an emerging style that has repetition.

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Features of the house: Kinnaur




1. Layered walls
2. Small windows
3. Pitched slate roof
4. Ridgeline ornament
5. Verandah overhang
6. Window bank
7. Carved upper panel
8. Facia trim




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Features of the house: Kinnaur




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Features of the house: Kinnaur



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Features of the house: Kinnaur



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The characteristics of the vernacular house include a layered ground floor wall construction, I have seen this reference to as Katakuni for its name, I imagine that there are different names. There is also small ground floor windows and doors, a pitch slate roof. You can also see here the ridgeline adornment, which is the fourth characteristic also seen here in more detail. The verandah overhangs, the window bank in the upper storey.

Here you can also see a great example of the next characteristic which is the curved upper panel under the windows and number eight the curved fascia trim which I was told this called Jelar. Again, there might be some other regional words for this trim detail but you can see that it runs up through the gable and then along the eave trim at the edge of the roof.

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I also want to point out that Kalpa has landscape features that contribute to very distinctive sense of place, that are outside of the house and generally not architectural, including stone walls, green paths, irrigation ditches, as well as religious symbols, including flags that are placed around the house. All of these contribute to a distinctiveness and identity of the cultural landscape. This is a reminder that the house does not exist in isolation. It is part of a larger setting. And there are many landscape attributes that can enhance our understanding of place and enhance the cohesiveness of a place.

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Of the eight Kinnaur vernacular features several has fallen from use in new construction, while others are more recently gained in popularity. As the house evolves. For example, the ground floor and upper storey veranda windows increased in size to incorporate glass. This seems a natural progression, for increased quality of living space, ventilation, light with the new access to glass came in the 50's 1950's particularly on the ground floor, which is now seldom used for animal pens and fodder agricultural storage, particularly in newer houses, and advancements in construction methods and materials allows those ground floor windows to increase in size.

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The verandah overhang first was a shallow construction overhang more of a function of making the upper storey a little bit bigger and not primarily targeted at creating covered usable space on the ground floor, which was mainly used for panning of animals and storage of animal feed and some tools.

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As the economy transitioned more towards apple, apple production and other orchard fruits and incomes increased. It seems to coincide with a deepening of the overhang where the outside became more of a usable protected space in which could store some of these agricultural products and also be used more as a sitting space and a covered workspace.

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The lower porch is now often enclosed with brick. Many people use this as added formal interior living space in place of storage or outdoor space. It looks like the biggest change comes in the use of materials. And look at the difference between the yellow house here and the other two houses.

The use of the wooden upper storey bank and the carved fascia detail on the other houses really make a difference in tying these houses to the vernacular traditions and the essential characteristics of the place. The yellow house looks more like it could be anywhere. Without these details, it just does not reflect the Kinnaur vernacular style.

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The region was known for its detailed carving, but wood is become less available through increased forest restrictions in carving has become much more costly. So, the carvings have become simplified and less common. And they are often done on a less lesser quality wood, sometimes on more of a plywood that does not support a deep relief of carving.

Also in the decade's past, there were few ways to show status and carving was the prime primary method of showing status as people explained. Now there are many more ways through just house size, cars, technology for example, clothes. That this is one of the many changes in society that we can see played out on the house.

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But, the use of carved fascia trim. The item that is locally called Jalar has flourished over the last 50 years. Once it was just commonplace on the temples, but it began to spread to the house with increasing regularity. And it was still a highly carved detail and very common among houses, on simple houses today, you still can see the use of Jalar, even in concrete block houses.


But now the detail often comes made in metal. So, it does not have a deep carving, like wood, but it still is cut out in metal and represents the traditional practice. It, of course looks very different. But the adaptability of the detail to a new material has given it a new life. Because metal is easily accessible, it lasts a long time. And it allows people to put this vernacular trade on really any type of construction.

Even when the material that originally created the trade is now unavailable. Also, the small-scale nature of this or the semi fixed nature of this ornament allows it to be added to a building after construction at any time, which helps work with people's budgets, if they can afford it later on. And it makes it a very flexible component.



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Changes to materials, form, and details = large-scale change




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Vernacular Landscape: Is there a threshold?



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The large-scale components, the building materials, the construction methods and the house form are particularly vulnerable to environmental and socio-economic changes. They are heavily influenced by availability of resources, and market trends, aspects that are somewhat out of the control of local residents. In Himachal few people, if any, can buy wood for construction, because it is so highly regulated. Some have wood that they have been storing for years. And they choose to use this wood only on the decorative features of the house, which they consider to be the most important such as trim. Without small scale features, the character of the house will change greatly.

As you can see, in this example, which has no ornamentation on the upper, upper portion, it does not have the trim, it does not have a window bank, so it just does not have any reflection of the traditional vernacular characteristics. And again, it looks like a house that could be anywhere.

Even with a change in building method, as you can see in this other example, which does not have the layered walls on the understory. It has a different roofing material, it has metal roofing, and occasionally the building form can look very different. This is a pretty big house. It does not have any overhang. But we can still see something close to the iconic vernacular style.

And this is done through the continued use of the small features or the ornamentation, in this case, the upper window bank, the window panels and the Jalar trim. So, local residents still have pride in this style that is came through in interviews, and many preferred wood construction in place of concrete construction for the house. But they have limitations to wood.

And there are real financial strains on trying to incorporate carving, so changes have occurred. The select features have the power to come together into this image of the iconic house. It is the combination in the frequency of these essential qualities that gives cultural congruency to the vernacular architecture and allows the rest of the house to modernize without sacrificing that iconic image.

That of course, it is not perfect, it has changed, but there is still a stronger connection. Several of these features can undergo adaptation and reinterpretation, without losing the essential connection to the iconic vernacular style. Resilient, small-scale features provide a greater range of acceptable modifications for the vernacular house. I know a lot of people would not

consider this house vernacular, since it is not a pure example of the historic iconic style. But my argument is that they are still a reflection of the vernacular style and that it is supported through these small ornamental features. Building materials are changing, house form is changing.

We have to make room for the study of vernacular houses that have undergone some form of modification that has actually kept it relevant for new generations. If they are still building houses that reflect the vernacular, there is a connection there. Without modification, many vernacular houses could be lost entirely.

It might be through the study of small semi fixed features, and a holistic view of the landscape that we are best able to understand the characteristics of the vernacular. Also, without investigating the reason behind the changes to the vernacular house, we would miss out on learning so much about a changing society. Thank you.

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