

Special Report

A Tribute to Paul Oliver

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Paul Oliver at Corn Ridge, Dartmoor, U.K., 2006, © Deb Macy.

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In 2002, while attending the “(Un)bounding Tradition” conference in Hong Kong, Paul Oliver was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by IASTE. The award publicly confirmed Paul’s status as one of the foremost pioneers and authorities in the field of vernacular and traditional architecture studies. Paul was delighted to receive the award. IASTE had always been close to his heart, and he had been actively involved in its conferences since the beginning in 1988, when he gave one of the keynote addresses in Berkeley. Indeed, up until that point, he had never missed one of the meetings.

Honored and proud to have received the award, he was nonetheless determined that it would not unintentionally come to symbolize the end of his academic career in the field. In terms of his work on vernacular architecture, Paul was at the height of his career in 2002 and busier than ever. Only a few years earlier, in 1997, he had published the monumental *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, an achievement that had earned him the accolade “vernacular man” in the U.K. press and had provoked direct comparisons with that other great architectural encyclopedist, Sir Banister Fletcher.¹ In the same year he had initiated the first MA program in international vernacular-architecture studies anywhere in the world, and he was actively supervising and examining Ph.D. students, attending vernacular architecture conferences and seminars, and advising heritage-management and -development programs around the world, while also working on both the second edition of *Dwellings* (2003; first edition 1987) and the *Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (published a few years later, in 2007).² Paul, aged 75 in 2002, was simply too busy to rest on his laurels.

Interestingly, Paul’s active involvement in the field of vernacular architecture studies began at a relatively late age, when he was already well into his thirties. Born Paul Hereford Oliver in Sherwood, Nottingham, in 1927, his interest in architecture had in fact been aroused at a much earlier age, largely influenced by his father, the architect Richard Norman Oliver. Oliver senior specialized in cinema design during the 1920s and 1930s, but during the Second World War he was employed by the War Office and involved in various design, camouflage and reconstruction efforts. In May 1942, aged only 15, Paul assisted his father in documenting the architectural destruction caused by the German bombing of Plymouth and Exeter. The experience made a large and painful impression on him and, as he later told me, triggered his interest in the intricate relationship between architecture and its social and cultural context — as well as the problem of social housing. After the war, aspiring to be an author and illustrator, he nonetheless pursued a career in art rather than architecture, taking courses at the Harrow School of Art (where he met his future wife Valerie Grace, née Coxon) and Goldsmiths’ College, from which he graduated in 1955.

Throughout these years, his interest in architecture (especially domestic and so-called “folk” buildings) remained strong. In the preface to the *Encyclopedia*, he noted how, in addition his awareness of the way architecture related to the lives of the communities that he lived among and visited, the series of articles “How Other Peoples Dwell and Build” by Erwin Anton Gutkind had a formative effect on his thinking about architecture.³ It was only during the early 1960s, however, that Paul had the opportunity to professionally develop this thinking when, as a trained art teacher, he was offered the post of “drawing master” at the Architectural Association (AA). His time at the AA, which included a teaching spell at the School of Architecture in Kumasi, Ghana, first allowed

him to seriously study the architecture of the world, and by the end of the decade it resulted in his so-called *Shelter* series, which comprised *Shelter and Society*; *Shelter in Africa*; *Shelter, Sign and Symbol*; and the little known *Shelter in Greece* (co-edited with Orestis Doumanis).⁴ By the time *Shelter and Society* appeared, he was already in his early forties.

Up until that time, Paul had by no means been idle, however. In fact, by the time that *Shelter and Society* was published he had already established himself as one of the foremost scholars of African-American, especially blues, music in the world. Indeed, Paul’s influence in this field was so large that “some writers have even referred to an ‘Oliverian’ tradition of blues scholarship.”⁵ Paul had first been exposed to African-American music when he was a teenager during the Second World War and at work in a scout camp in Stoke-by-Clare, Suffolk. The camp was close to an American army base, where one of his friends introduced him to the “eerie” and “compelling” singing of African-American soldiers.⁶ After the war, Paul began to collect blues records and to swap them with other enthusiasts as well as research the music genre in its historical and cultural context. During the 1950s and 1960s, he wrote numerous essays for music magazines, designed covers for blues albums, collected magazines, books and song sheets, and recorded and interviewed a large number of blues musicians during his research trips to the United States. He also wrote some of the best-known and widely referenced books on the subject — including *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*; *Conversation with the Blues*; and *The Story of the Blues* — and presented a series of popular broadcasts on the music for the BBC.⁷ His pioneering work on the blues resulted in his induction in the Blues Hall of Fame in Memphis in 2008. His blues collection, the Paul Oliver Collection of African American Music and Related Traditions, is now housed as a Special Collection in the Headington Library of Oxford Brookes University.

Although Paul never lost his love for and interest in the blues, and continued to collect, research and write about it well into his eighties, from the 1970s onward he increasingly alternated his work on the blues with the study of architecture. One of the reasons for this decision was that by that time, as he told me, most of the blues singers that he was interested in had passed away. In his opinion, the folk tradition that had captivated him was giving way to a more commercialized and popular one that did not hold as much interest to him.⁸ Architecture, on the other hand, although also subject, as a formal discipline, to commercialization, still contained a lot of folk traditions that were “alive” and that could be studied.

Interestingly, however (and in spite of his “vernacular man” accolade), Paul’s interest in architecture was never restricted to folk or “vernacular” traditions only. His early publications on architecture mainly tried to draw attention to the relationship between architecture, culture and society. Partly out of frustration with Bernard Rudofsky’s “Architec-

ture without Architects” exhibition, Paul was keen to show that buildings were not independent art objects but cultural products that were made “to meet the needs of their respective communities and contain values special to them.”⁹ This intricate relationship of architecture to the society and culture it formed part of applied not only to vernacular buildings, but to all forms of architecture designed and built by people around the world.

Throughout his career, Paul was a strong advocate for the recognition and appreciation of the everyday, nonmonumental, non-architect-designed works of architecture that, as “vernacular architecture,” make up a significant part of the world’s built environment (Paul, himself, used quotation marks when employing the term in his early publications). But he was, in fact, equally interested in the “capital-A” architecture that forms the subject for much of the professional and academic discourse on the subject. “Architecture,” he wrote in *Architecture: An Invitation*, “is for all, and by all,” and should, as such, be studied using an inclusive and cross-cultural approach that does not give precedence to one form of building over another.¹⁰

Paul’s engagement with architecture resulted in a large number of publications. In addition to his early *Shelter* series, which he edited, he co-authored *Dunroamin: The Suburban Semi and Its Enemies* (with Ian Davis and Ian Bentley) and *Architecture: An Invitation* (with Richard Hayward).¹¹ He also wrote *Dwellings: The House across the World*, which was later revised and expanded as *Dwellings: The Vernacular House Worldwide*.¹² *Dwellings* is in fact the only book on the subject that he authored all by himself — although a collection of his earlier conference papers and publications was published in 2006 under the title *Built to Meet Needs: Cultural Issues in Vernacular Architecture*, while *The Bazaar of Isfahan*, although in essence a collaborative project with more than one author, was in the end also written by Paul alone.¹³

Although the relationship between architecture, society and culture is central to all these works, from the late 1980s onwards Paul’s writings began to be characterized by a more direct engagement with contemporary social concerns, especially housing. No doubt influenced by his father’s work during the Second World War, as well as by his own experiences of working on a number of postdisaster housing projects in Turkey, Mexico and Pakistan, Paul increasingly began to explore the potentially important role that vernacular architecture could play in providing culturally appropriate solutions to the challenges of population growth, natural disasters, and climate change. In both his writings and his teaching, as well as through his support of organizations such as the Development Workshop, he began to emphasize the urgency to study the vernacular architecture of the world and learn from its accumulated knowledge and wisdom. In so doing, he helped to lay the foundations for the more engaged, “activist-oriented” study of vernacular architecture that has become more prominent in the last fifteen years or so.¹⁴

Paul’s most important publication is undoubtedly the monumental *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, which he edited from the late 1980s onward, and which was finally published, to great acclaim, in 1997.¹⁵ To structure the three-volume work, he devised a unique classification system based on cultures and culture regions. In this way, the *Encyclopedia* epitomized Paul’s structural-functional approach, which emphasized how different peoples around the world build and dwell in different forms of architecture, and how one could only understand these unique and distinct forms of architecture by seeing them as integral to the societies and cultures that produced them. This approach may by now be regarded as problematic in that it assumes that architecture, society and culture have an independent existence, regardless of human agency, and that they are place specific, clearly bounded, and potentially fixed in their nature.¹⁶ But in the case of the *Encyclopedia*, the approach allowed Paul to develop a structure that demonstrated meaningful interrelationships between the entries, and which enabled him to avoid having to rely on a more conventional A–Z or extended-essay structure.

To complete the *Encyclopedia*, Paul brought together more than 750 authors from more than 80 countries. He personally wrote those entries for which he could not find other authors, and he provided many of the photographs and drawings used to illustrate the entries. The *Encyclopedia* won the Sir Bannister Fletcher Award for Art and Architecture in 1998, and was identified as a turning-point in the development of the field of vernacular architecture studies in 2006 by Amos Rapoport.¹⁷ More recently, Jeremy Till referred to it as “a magisterial” work “which has more lessons in it than any other architecture book I know.”¹⁸

As in the case of his blues work, Paul did not restrict his engagement with architecture to writing. Throughout his career, he collected books and journals on the subject, as well as prints and stamps. His architecture collection, the Paul Oliver Vernacular Architecture Library (POVAL), comprises well-known and influential publications in the field of vernacular architecture studies as well as important works from around the world that are little-known and difficult to obtain. It also contains a substantial number of works on modern and “capital-A” architecture, as well as more general writings on anthropology, archaeology and (art) history. In addition to his books, prints and stamps, the collection contains Paul’s personal archive (which includes correspondence, conference papers, notebooks and press cuttings), as well as the 25,000 or so slides and photographs that he took on his travels from 1960 to 2012. Paul was a prolific amateur photographer, who documented building materials, technologies, forms and details wherever he went. Altogether, his images reflect his inclusive and cross-cultural understanding of architecture. But they also capture the variety of ways in which peoples and cultures around the world expressed their needs, values and aspirations in architectural form during the second half of

the twentieth century. More than 20,000 of the slides have been digitized and are available for teaching and research purposes, open access, at www.poval.org.uk. A small selection of the images was shown as the “Architecture for All: The Photography of Paul Oliver” exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in 2015.¹⁹ In line with Paul’s wish that the collection form the basis for further research and teaching in the field, the POVAL collection is today a Special Collection in the Headington Library of Oxford Brookes University.

Paul’s contribution to the field of vernacular and traditional architecture studies is monumental and beyond doubt. His writings demonstrate the value of an inclusive and cross-cultural approach to the study of architecture and act as a reminder to continue to look beyond the narrowly defined boundaries of the architectural canon. His edited works have helped to define and validate the field of international vernacular architecture studies and have made visible the work of large numbers of students and scholars. His photographs bear witness to the extraordinary richness, beauty and tenacity of the architectural heritage of the world and raise

questions about how to look after and learn from it. And his teachings have inspired several generations of students to study the architectural traditions of the world and to respond to them in creative, meaningful and responsible ways so as to be able to face up to contemporary social, economic and environmental challenges.

At a time when environmental change, population growth, globalization, urbanization and conflict are major social concerns that result in the accelerating destruction of many traditional forms of architecture, as well as in the emergence of many new architectural traditions, Paul’s inclusive and cultural-relativist message about the importance of recognizing all architectural traditions in the world as part of a common built heritage remains as relevant as it ever was during the fifty or so years of his career. Paul’s knowledge, wisdom and understanding of the architecture of the world will be missed, but his legacy will surely live on.

Paul Hereford Oliver

May 25 1927 – August 15, 2017

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