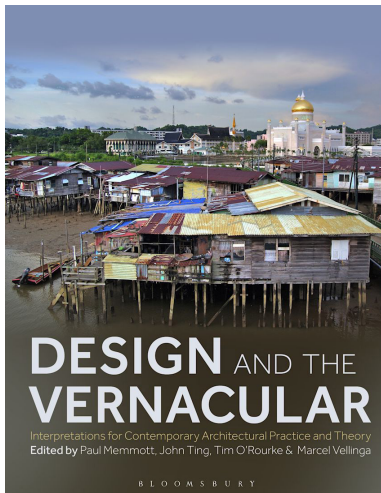


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Design and the Vernacular: Interpretations for Contemporary Architectural Practice and Theory Edited by Paul Memmott, John Ting, Tim O'Rourke, and Marcel Vellinga Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023, 320 pp.



Design and the Vernacular is a collection of well-chosen essays edited by Paul Memmott, John Ting, Tim O'Rourke, and Marcel Vellinga. The sixteen contributions are a relatively well-balanced representation of the Australasia and Pacific regions. The scholars carefully crafted an understanding of Indigenous and vernacular practices based on their geography, materiality, and climate. They situated them in relation to historical events, colonisation and inter-atoll migration shifts, and sociopolitical and cultural changes.

The book invites us to consider vernacular architecture from a contemporary perspective—a living form of architecture that organically evolves alongside its context. By doing so, the connection between architecture, vernacular, and politics becomes apparent and the book's key argument, which is its interpretation of vernacular as a process rather than a final product or artefact, emerges. The scholars' contributions to this collection describe how vernacular architecture is a non-linear, dynamic, and evolving process influenced by multiple factors, such as different migration patterns, demographic shifts, sociocultural and political circumstances, and climate and environmental conditions.

While the book doesn't refute the widely accepted views on vernacular sustainability, mostly stemming from the general conception of the vernacular as a form of architecture that manifests Indigenous connection to the earth (or country)—a symbiotic way of living that understands the climate and the environment rooted in many of the region's Indigenous cultures—it questions how the tangible and intangible characteristics of the Australasia and Pacific vernacular can respond to contemporary challenges. To answer, the collection presents a diverse selection of case studies that embrace not only the production of architecture, its materiality, and physicality, but also the process itself.

The book's first section exposes the gaps between the Indigenous and colonial values systems, inviting us to reflect on and consider what we could do to design and deliver culturally appropriate projects and research. We often hear about

co-design, participation, and inclusiveness in architecture, planning, and other disciplines. However, what does meaningful engagement look like? Particularly when Indigenous people are a key actor. The Eurocentric cultural hegemony still influences many aspects of our societies, including how we conduct research and design and implement projects, and how funding streams are set up or construction projects are budgeted and delivered. The cases presented on humanitarian architecture (Charmaine 'Ilaü Talei) and research practices (Savannah Brown (Ngāti Whātua o Kaipara, Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Wai), Amber Ruckes (Tūhoe), Faye Mendes-Underwood (Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa), Aisea Fanamanu, Deidre Brown (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu)) highlight the challenges generated by the gaps between different value systems, illustrating how integrating and working with Indigenous practices can yield positive outcomes.

Likewise, the case studies of Indigenous architectural practices of Arnhem's country (Kabulwarnamyo homeland and Maningrida homelands) demonstrate how flexible funding arrangements and mutually beneficial partnerships between traditional owners and land management bodies can deliver sustainable outcomes (Hannah Robertson). These last examples also enforce the connection between vernacular and modernity by illustrating how vernacular architecture and features can be integrated into modern building methods. Contributions by Gabriele Weichart, Tim O'Rourke, Hannah Robertson, James Miller, and R. H. Rusch, J. H. N. Amar, and L. A. Armitage bring attention to the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge and practices. By breaking the conventional juxtaposition of modern and vernacular, innovative and traditional, the scholars in this section achieve two objectives. First, they demonstrate the Indigenous population's agency in adapting and producing vernacular landscapes. Second, they elaborate on the hybridisation of vernacular architecture, which can occur over time and can be influenced by multiple factors, from political interests and social changes to migration patterns and cultural shifts or the necessity to adapt to changing climate conditions.

The book's section on how migration patterns intertwine with vernacular processes unpacks a core theme. Colonial settlers' impacts on Indigenous vernacular are more commonly discussed in terms of disruption or marginalisation of the vernacular, as foreign materials, knowledge, and sociocultural practices are introduced. Colonial migration tends to create a hierarchy where the vernacular is subject to the new imported forms of architecture (Edson G. Cabalfin).

However, the book's content widens to include other forms of migration, like labour and diasporic movements, and climate-induced migration, offering an alternative and compelling reading of vernacularisation processes. Diasporic and labour movements create a more balanced power dynamic between the vernacular and migrants' knowledge and practices. Their influence on the built environment is more subtle and indirect, generating vernacular forms that mark their identity and express their need to create a space for themselves in the settlement country (David Beynon and Ian Woodcock). For climate-induced migrants, on the other hand, the big questions are whether vernacularisation processes can be reproduced in settlement countries and who owns them (Lizzie Yarina, Penny Allan, and Martin Bryant).

The intriguing element of this collection is the connection between vernacular and politics, nation-building, and collective identities. For colonised nations,

referencing pre-colonial architectural forms serves the dual purpose of uniting people under a shared banner while rejecting imposed colonial identities. The conical houses on the Loyalty Islands rekindled Kanak identity (Louis Lagarde and Yves-Béalo Gony). Flowers, plants, and dancing women were some of the vernacular features intended to mark a distinctive Filipino architecture (Edson G. Cabalfin). However, for culturally diverse countries, this exercise is driven by political decisions that ultimately pick elements that belong to a dominant group or can serve specific interests at the expense of others. Ultimately, political decisions can either harness or inhibit vernacular potential.

The strength of *Design and the Vernacular* lies in how it successfully challenges the conventional modern–vernacular binary thinking, which sees modern architecture as innovative and flexible in contrast to vernacular architecture, which is considered traditional and unchanging. Its contemporary approach to vernacular, strong emphasis on the process, and separation of the vernacular from a specific location or group afford us the opportunity to examine past, present, and future vernacular.

By sifting through the pages, readers can encounter some thought-provoking ideas and take away a few clear messages. Vernacular processes are not a one-way series of actions but a diversified network of interactions. Can vernacular and the vernacularisation of our processes help respond to sociocultural challenges and climate crises? Most likely. However, the hegemonic cultural monopoly we inherited from colonial times must end. We ought to recognise diverse sociocultural values in their own right. This includes rethinking how we conduct research: What does co-design genuinely mean? What does a culturally aware ethics clearance look like? How do we develop an equal and meaningful partnership? We must reconsider how funding streams are structured and their accessibility and eligibility criteria. *Design and the Vernacular* provides insights into how we can reframe our thinking and internalise Indigenous practices in our processes, but much more needs to be done. While I would certainly recommend this book to academics, it is a must-read for policy-makers, built environment practitioners, and humanitarian professionals.