

It was agreed at the ICOMOS meeting in Plovdiv in June 1978 that each participant should produce a brief analysis and definition of vernacular architecture. It is probable that there will be broad agreement about the general meaning of the term, but that its application will vary greatly from country to country. What follows is an attempt to apply the term to English houses, to determine which buildings are and which are not vernacular, and to suggest how this may contribute to the study of English history. It may be that such a survey will be useful to students of vernacular architecture in other countries. Since this is written for a European audience I should emphasise that I am discussing England and not the United Kingdom, and that I shall have nothing to say about Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Further, I should point out that I am dealing with vernacular architecture in the countryside only, and not in the towns.

In one way there is little difficulty about the definition of vernacular architecture: of the common people, the opposite of 'polite' architecture, the architecture of the upper classes. But having said that, the problem remains of deciding who were the common people and how, in the absence of documents, their houses can be identified. Of course, anyone can tell the difference between a peasant and a prince and between a cottage and a castle, but at intermediate levels the distinction between 'vernacular' and 'polite' is often far from clear.

The attempt has been made to distinguish vernacular buildings from polite ones on the basis that the former are built of traditional materials in a traditional way to a traditional form and with traditional ornament. But until the end of the Middle Ages, and well beyond, all buildings in England were traditional and in northern and western England many upper class buildings were traditional until the end of the 17th century. Nearly all vernacular buildings are indeed traditional, but „traditional“ and „vernacular“ are not synonymous terms.

Vernacular houses have also been defined as „regional“ houses, that is houses which belong to a type which is common within and peculiar to a limited part of the country. Vernacular houses certainly tend to be regional, but again that does not differentiate them from polite houses, for many of these remained regional until well into the 18th century. And on the other hand many vernacular houses belong to types which are too widespread to be called regional.

Other criteria have been advanced: that vernacular houses are small and mean; that they are built in a crude way by the owner or his peers and not by craftsmen; that their form is determined by their function. But many vernacular houses in south east England are equal in accommodation and in display to contemporary manor houses in many parts of the country and superior to the manor houses of some other parts; and these houses were certainly not erected by the owner but by craftsmen of the same skill as those working on polite houses. It is true that their form was determined by their function, but so was the form of many polite houses as late as the 18th century.

Vernacular house cannot be identified by architectural criteria; they are a sociological and not an architectural category and if I may be immodest enough to quote my own words from *English Vernacular Houses* they are "those which belong to a type which is common within a given area at a given time. It follows that a kind of building may at any one time be „vernacular“ in one area and „non-vernacular“ in another, and in any one area may change in the course of time from „non-vernacular“ to „vernacular“. In other words no building is or is not „vernacular“ for its own qualities but is so by virtue of those which it shares with many others, and the identification of „vernacular“ buildings is very much a matter of relative numbers“.

When they are identified in this way the significance of surviving early vernacular houses becomes apparent. Many vernacular houses which one sees today have survived from the 18th century at the latest; many have survived from the 16th and 17th centuries, and many have survived from the 15th century. No-one will doubt that buildings capable of enduring centuries of English wind and weather must have been very substantially built in the first place. But substantial buildings are expensive buildings and their appearance in large numbers in a small area suggests the existence of a broad class of comparatively wealthy men. Evidence from the excavations of medieval rural sites, however, show that everywhere until the late Middle Ages, and in some parts long afterwards, the houses of the villagers were built of flimsy materials that had to be renewed every generation or so.

With that in mind it is not unreasonable to suppose that the large number of rural houses in south eastern England dating from c. 1450 to c. 1550 reflect the first appearance of a class, or stratum, of wealthy peasants. Sometimes as many as ten such houses survive in a single village and we may be confident that these were not the houses of a gentry. But whether they were the houses of a minority among the villagers or of ordinary villagers we cannot tell from their present numbers alone, for we do not know how many have failed to survive.

We can say however that many of them are as large as manor houses and that their owners must have been at a comparable level of wealth. It is unlikely that they could have accumulated that much wealth at that time by the labour of their own hands and it is probable that they were exploiting the labour of fellow peasants, of the sons and daughters of smallholders whose own land would not fully support all their children, and even of poorer peasants with little land who had to work for other men for part of their time. Further we know from travellers' descriptions of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries that the houses of many men in the countryside were still of mud or similar materials. We know too that in the north west it was still common in the 18th century for the friends and relations of a newly-married couple to assemble on the wedding day and build a house for them before darkness fell. Throughout much of England in the 17th and 18th centuries it was a popular belief among the peasants that if anyone could build a house on the manorial waste between dawn and sunset he established a title and could live there unmolested. The belief was mistaken, but like the north-western custom, it illustrates what flimsy structures the „houses“ of many people still were at a time when many substantial vernacular houses were already there. It is therefore likely that only a minority of the peasantry, even if a large minority, lived in those kinds of vernacular houses which were well enough built to have survived.

The phenomenon observed in the South East in the late Middle Ages occurred elsewhere at that period in one or two small areas. At a later date, and at a lower level of accommodation, it occurred throughout much of southern and midland England in the 16th century, and in northern England in the course of the 17th. The social history of the English peasantry is not well documented since most of the documents were drawn up for and reflect the interests of the upper classes, but by studying vernacular architecture we may trace the development throughout the country and over several centuries of that upper section among the peasantry who were to play an important, and sometimes decisive, role in English history from the 15th century to the 18th. These were the yeomanry and the surviving examples of English vernacular architecture of a date prior to c. 1750 are mostly the homes of yeomen.

Just as one may trace the rise of the yeomen by a study of surviving vernacular houses of a date prior to c. 1750

so too is their destruction revealed in the new vernacular architecture of the mid-18th century onwards. At that time there appeared throughout most of England, an almost standard farmhouse which was a copy of the polite houses of the well-to-do merchants and professional men in the towns. Almost simultaneously there also appeared in the countryside rows of cottages which were counterparts of the streets of workers' houses in the new towns. The old rural society, far from egalitarian but extremely homogenous, was giving way to the new one of capitalist farmers and agricultural proletariat.

A knowledge of vernacular architecture is therefore not merely an end in itself, important though that is, but also a means towards a greater end: the understanding of the development of rural society and especially of those aspects which are not well documented. But it is probable that by the end of the century most surviving vernacular buildings in England will have been destroyed or else have been altered beyond recognition in order to adopt them to modern conditions. Their

façades or the façades of many of them, may have been kept and some whole buildings may be preserved in museum conditions, and they may still play a part in giving character to a landscape and in attracting the tourist. But the interiors of most of them will have been gutted and they will no longer be what they are now, historical documents of equal value in their sphere to those studied by many generations of many historians. The study of English vernacular architecture is therefore as urgent a problem for the historians as its preservation, or the preservation of as much as possible, is an urgent task for the planner and the citizen. What is true of England may also be true, *mutatis mutandis*, of other countries faced with the dilemmas of change and development in the late 20th century. Each country will solve, or fail to solve, the problem of studying and preserving its heritage of vernacular architecture in its own way, but it is probable that each can learn something from the knowledge of the difficulties of all the others.

SUR L'ARCHITECTURE VERNACULAIRE IRLANDAISE

RADU CREȚEANU

Bien que d'un format réduit, les deux récents ouvrages dont nous donnons ci-dessous un aperçu présentent un intérêt particulier tant par la richesse de leur contenu que par le fait qu'ils traitent d'un secteur de l'architecture vernaculaire européenne relativement peu connu, du moins en Roumanie, celui de l'Irlande. Nous devons souligner dès le début que si ce contenu est aussi riche, c'est parce que, tout comme notre pays, l'Irlande a conservé jusqu'à ces dernières décennies un

caractère rural très prononcé, et cela autant dans la République d'Irlande que dans l'Irlande du Nord.

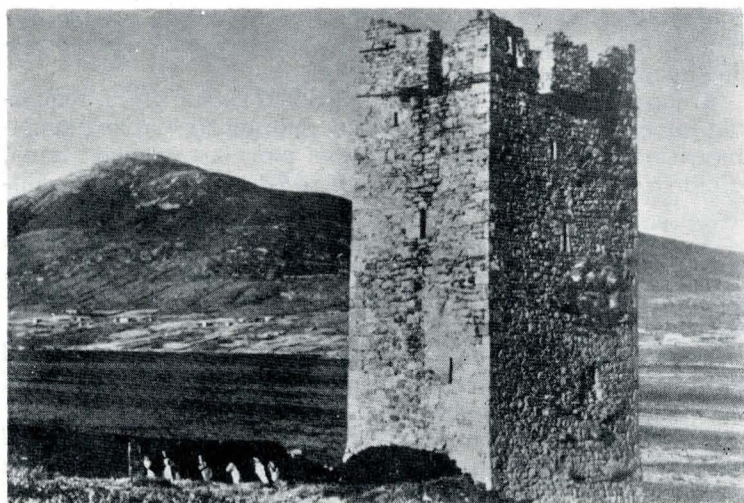
Kevin Danaher (Caoimhin O Danachair), *Ireland's Vernacular Architecture*, Cork, s.d. (collection „Irish Life and Culture”), 82 p.+68 illustrations en noir et blanc.

Kevin Danaher — qui est aussi le coordonnateur de la collection — traite dans ce volume-ci de la République d'Irlande. Ce qui frappe tout de suite le lecteur, c'est le caractère extrêmement varié du matériel, fait explicable puisque l'architecture vernaculaire peut être définie comme celle réalisée par chacun „selon ses goûts, avec ses ressources personnelles et pour satisfaire ses besoins personnels, sans l'intervention d'un architecte de métier, sans style formel ni tendance à suivre la mode“ (p. 5). Etant donné cette variété, l'auteur a opté pour la formule selon nous la plus indiquée dans ce genre d'entreprises: une brève introduction suivie d'un grand nombre d'illustrations accompagnées d'amples commentaires, chacune sur une page qui forme ainsi une véritable présentation.

L'architecture vernaculaire irlandaise peut être divisée en trois catégories de constructions: domestiques (la demeure proprement dite du fermier ou de l'artisan), agricoles (les bâtiments annexes de la ferme) et industrielles (ateliers, forges, moulins à eau et à vent, installations techniques qui ont précédé la révolution industrielle, etc.). La première catégorie est de loin la mieux représentée et la plus intéressante. Un élément dont il convient de tenir compte est le facteur social, plus précisément la tendance marquée, dans une société conservatrice et „class-conscious“, à maintenir les apparences, sans verser pour autant dans les dépenses excessives ou dans l'ostentation. Cependant, l'élément déterminant, sur lequel l'auteur fournit d'amples détails, est le matériau et donc, indirectement, les procédés de construction. Soulignons à cet égard une différence essentielle entre l'architecture vernaculaire d'Irlande et celle de Roumanie: dans les mêmes conditions d'emploi presque exclusif des matériaux locaux, en raison des difficultés de transport, l'Irlande, contrairement à ce qui s'est passé chez nous, bâtit le plus souvent en pierre (avec ou sans mortier), argile et dans une moindre mesure en brique, mais n'utilise que fort peu le bois, fait que l'auteur met en liaison avec la destruction des forêts irlandaises au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècles, pour des raisons militaires d'abord et commerciales ensuite (p. 8). Il existe néanmoins un élément de construction commun pour les deux pays, ce sont les couvertures de toit en chaume, très répandues en Irlande et qui aboutissent souvent à des formes élaborées, notamment dans les „thatched mansions“, maisons à deux niveaux et toit en chaume, sans doute dérivées de maisons de ville où le rez-de-chaussée était réservé à l'exercice d'un métier ou d'un commer-



Maison de paysan aisé du VIII^e siècle à Callan, comté de Kilkenny (Ireland's Vernacular Architecture, p. 33).



Tour d'habitation à Achill Sound, comté de Mayo (Ireland's Vernacular Architecture, p. 15).