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## Vernacular Architecture

By Van Dorn Hooker

One rainy afternoon in late February of this year, my wife Peggy and I were driving north from New Orleans toward Natchez, Mississippi, when we came to Saint Francisville in West Feliciana Parish. It is a very interesting little town full of houses and buildings many of them dating from the early 1800s. The parish of Feliciana was divided into East and West in 1824. The town grew up around a 1720 French fort, but later the area became part of England's West Florida. There was an emigration of settlers from the United States that soon outnumbered the French and Creoles and the parish took on a distinct "Anglo-Saxon" character. It is still called English Louisiana.

In 1810 a group of planters rebelled against persistent Spanish claims on the area and formed a republic. They flew a lone star flag for 76 days until October 27, when President James Madison declared the area to be part of the United States.

We found a very nice, small museum operated by the West Feliciana Historical Society that had much information about the stay of John James Audubon, the famous artist and naturalist, in Feliciana in the early 1820s when he did many of his pictures of birds. But they also had an exhibit of the "vernacular" architecture of the area. We thought the definition of vernacular architecture accompanying the exhibit was so good that I obtained a copy of it. The museum personnel thought that it was written by the architecture student who helped put the exhibit together, but they did not know his name.

The exhibit included photographs and measured drawings representing highlights from "A Survey of Vernacular Architecture" by the West Feliciana Historical Society in 1976 as a Bicentennial observance. The complete survey contained 350 photographs of 120 structures found in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana.

### Definition of Vernacular Architecture

Vernacular Architecture is not easily defined. The term "vernacular" is borrowed from language, where it means "the language or dialect... naturally spoken by the people of a particular country or district." The phrase "vernacular architecture" was first used in England in the 1850s to describe medieval houses which had no other place in the artistic and stylistic categories set down by 19th century academics. More recently it has come to mean any structure devoted to everyday

uses built by unschooled, but not unskilled, craftsmen working within a commonly understood cultural and technical tradition.

The range of structures includes dwellings, barns, outside kitchens, privies, hen houses, corn cribs, schools, churches, meeting halls, and the like, none limited to any single era or locality. Often unseen, lacking "style" easily discernible in the landscape, vernacular structures are indeed ordinary, but they can be extraordinarily pleasing to the eye and mind. They can, in many cases, rank with the best works of architecture.

"Naturally" understood by the people: A difficult concept, but fundamental to understanding vernacular architecture. Structures in the vernacular are cognitive more than imaginative. That is to say, in our collective mind there exists a set of images of what constitutes a house, or a barn, or even an automobile. These images are partly what identifies us with our particular culture or group. Builders in the vernacular have similar images of what constitutes certain structures; images handed down by traditions and enriched by changing lifestyles. Single pen cabins with separate kitchens and privies become double pens with kitchen ells and indoor plumbing and finally subdivision houses with two-car garages. All fit the image of "house." All, too, are subject to influences from other traditions introduced along the way.

To know vernacular architecture one must know a people and their expectations as well as one's own. To say "that's just an old house" actually says a great deal about who we are and where we've come from; who a person is and where he has come from. Perhaps that old, ordinary, unremarkable house down anyone's way lacks drama, but it is as profound a monument as any in marble or granite.

In 1990, Van Dorn Hooker, FAIA (past University Architect at UNM) attended an exhibit entitled "A Survey of Vernacular Architecture" which was shown by the West Feliciana Historical Society in Louisiana.

The above information was provided in a handout available at the exhibit.

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