

Traditional Rural Edifices : a french approach by Didier Bouillon

Professor , École nationale supérieure du Paysage de Versailles

This paper intends to give a short introduction to the way the French deal with rural vernacular architecture. We will first discuss a few terms used in the French language to refer to traditional rural buildings: how relevant is it to use such terms as « architecture », « buildings », « houses », « farms », etc. And how should they be qualified? Are they « rural », « rustic », « vernacular », « folk- (...), « traditional »? All this could seem to be a mere question of choice of vocabulary. We will try to demonstrate that there is more to it and that no word is neutral: to each term applies a connotation that refers to theories, methodologies, even ideologies. Then we will submit two definitions – among so many - of vernacular architecture: one commonly used by social anthropologists, the second, by C. Lassure, trying to take into account several criteria from different social sciences and other disciplines.

We will then introduce briefly the different approaches of rural architecture from the end of the XIXth century: it will appear that architects have little contributed to the subject as opposed to other fields of research such as geography, social anthropology, sociology or history. We will also see that several points such as the importance of natural factors or the opposition between universalists and regionalists, bitterly discussed as early as in the beginning of the XXth century, are still topical and still have their defenders.

The second part of this paper tries to be more practical. It starts with the survey of the three main inventories, which are the sources of our present field-knowledge. The first one, directed by R. de Foville at the end of XIX century, is one of the first systematic approaches ever achieved in France; in spite of its lacks (the French provinces are unevenly covered) and its hygienist orientation, it gives us a rather accurate description of now gone edifices. The second one has been achieved by the social anthropologists of the Musée national des arts et traditions populaires during World War II, then updated in the seventies, and is still being published.

Strongly influenced by linguistic structuralism, it aims to define « models », « types », « genders », « variants », etc. among rural buildings. In spite of the relative scarcity of descriptions, it is an important contribution to methodology and general theory. The third one is the official Inventory launched by the French Ministry of Culture, and is still in progress. Since all buildings of interest cannot be preserved or protected and therefore are bound to disappear one day, the Inventory tries to keep at least a description of these traces of the past. The results of this highly detailed work are accessible through numerous publications and databases.

All this will be followed by a resources catalogue: bibliographical resources on the topic and where to consult the documents; Internet contacts, addresses of houses museums in France.

D. Bouillon
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