

# TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTS IN A POST-TRADITIONAL WORLD: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

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**Keywords:** Traditional dwellings and settlements, transmission, constraint, product and process, climate, privacy, rituals and symbols, aesthetics, sustainable building practices, historic preservation, modernization, authenticity, nostalgia, global tourism, neo-traditional environments, post-traditional environments.

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## Summary

Drawing on various theoretical formulations of tradition, this chapter uses examples from the built environment to trace the development of the interdisciplinary study of traditional environments, from its popularization in the twentieth century, to the critical approaches of the last decades. The first and second sections discuss the main theoretical formulations that have shaped how we understand the history and evolution of traditional environments. Using examples of traditional dwellings and settlements from around the world, the third section examines the ways in which various methodological approaches have produced distinct classifications of traditional environments. The last sections examine the critical theoretical developments of the last decades, which brought into question some of the classical approaches to the study of traditional environments. The concluding section develops an account of the evolution of traditional environments in a post traditional world, and examines the resurgence of the interest in tradition in architecture practice and urban planning. The chapter ends with a reflection on the relationship between the preservation of traditional environments and nostalgia for an idealized past in the context of an ever expanding tourist industry.

## 1. Introduction

Traditional environments are the creation of members of traditional societies and the spatial expression of a heritage that is handed down from one generation to another (Oliver 1989). Whether located in urban contexts or in rural areas, traditional environments are typically created by common people without the help of a professional. The study of traditional environments is not the domain of a particular specialized field; rather it is the intersection of various disciplines. Whether examined at the scale of the individual dwelling or the scale of the settlement, traditional environments have been the object of study of architecture, historic preservation, cultural anthropology, geography, building science, cultural landscapes, and folk studies among others. The dwelling unit is the most basic component of traditional environments. Various factors such as climate, geography, aesthetic conventions, and social practices determine the characteristics of traditional dwellings. A larger scale of analysis is that of settlements, which reveal much about the spatial organization, social hierarchy, and rituals of a traditional society. Some argue that there is no such thing as “traditional environments,” but that there are only environments that embody traditions. This approach allows us to identify the complex relationships between form, meaning, and process that form traditional environments.

Traditional environments have preoccupied scholars since the nineteen-century, when Lewis Morgan (1965 [1881]) pioneered the study of American Aborigines dwellings, and Edward Morse (1961 [1896]) wrote about traditional Japanese building principles. Bernard Rudofsky's (1987 [1964]) exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art entitled “Architecture without Architects,” and an accompanying book, further popularized the study of vernacular architecture in the 1960s. The last decades of the twentieth century saw further developments in the field with studies such *House Form and Culture* by Amos Rapoport (1969), and culminating in the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* by Paul Oliver (1998). Other relevant publications include Paul Oliver's (1987) *Dwellings: The House across the World*, and Enrico Guidoni's (1987) *Primitive Architecture*. Finally, the study of tradition has been famously problematized by scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, as well as Edward Shils, who have analyzed tradition in a historical context and questioned the origins of certain tradition and its supposed origins. Since major books on tradition such as *Tradition* by Edward Shils (1981), *The Invention of Tradition* by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), and *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson (1983), there has been little theorization of tradition. In contrast, the study of traditional environments has burgeoned into a sub-discipline of its own, one that uses space as the primary lens through which to understand tradition. Rather than treating space as a case study that reflects the various theoretical formulations of traditional societies, the spatial approach to tradition emerges from the investigation of space and place, and it relates to very specific geographies and sociopolitical contexts.

In the modern era, interest in traditional dwellings and settlements has become widespread among scholars in multiple disciplines, not least because everything that was pre-modern had to be categorized and given a name. Thus, the contemporary understanding of the term “tradition” was articulated in opposition with the modern. Since the colonial period, scholars have been assigning various labels to traditional

environments, such as “vernacular”, “folk”, “primitive”, “indigenous”, “popular”, and “anonymous.” These terms come from different disciplines and reflect not only the wide diversity of traditional environments, but also the variety of analytical approaches to the study of traditional societies. Such categories are not necessarily equivalent, as they might refer to differing aspects of traditional environments. For example, a vernacular building is not necessarily indigenous. In today’s globalizing world, vernacular dwellings in many traditional environments are built in local styles and motifs but with imported rather than indigenous materials. “Indigenous” refers to something that originates in a place, while “vernacular” means of the masses, or ordinary, and does not refer to local origin. Furthermore, the term “vernacular” is based on class or social grouping, while the term “indigenous” is a place-based concept.

While there is no single qualifier that encompasses all these different analytical aspects, we can, however, regard traditional environments as a single analytical group. They are created through a process and practice that becomes a norm when enough members of a social group adopt it. As such, traditional environments exist everywhere around the world, and cannot be regarded as being simply the product of primitive, indigenous, or tribal societies in the developing world. Since the adoption of a practice into a norm, and its intergenerational transmission, are fundamental qualities of tradition, we can begin to think of the notion of tradition as an all-encompassing term that the various qualifiers of traditional environments have in common. One may argue that “tradition” is less pejorative than terms such as “primitive” and “ordinary”, previously used to describe built environments, which may explain its widespread adoption by scholars in the past decades.

## 2. Defining and Theorizing Tradition

Tradition is a term with a multiplicity of meanings that cannot be reduced to a unified idea. Thus, we must think of tradition as a concept with an open definition. As such, the term may be useful in an age when scholars are beginning to recognize that the study of traditional environments—whose form originated as part of everyday processes rather than specialized professional aesthetic judgments—is an interdisciplinary arena. Like professional traditions, such as science, medicine, or professional architectural practice, traditional environments will remain an open field subject to multiple changes in position.

### 2.1. Tradition as Transmission

In its most basic sense, tradition means *traditum*, or something that is transmitted (Shils 1981). One may argue that a built environment is traditional if it satisfies two criteria. First, it should be the result of a process of transmission from one generation to the next; second, it should have cultural origins mainly involving common people. As such, traditional environments are those buildings, settlements, and spaces that provide for the ordinary activities of common folks, and which are produced by both utilitarian logic as well as local aesthetics.

Traditional environments are more than just artifacts and products. They are cultural landscapes that stand at the intersection of several elements: space, time, meaning, and

communication (Rapoport 1989). Understanding traditional environments not as a product, but as the result of a process of transmission allows for the classification of vastly different types of traditional environments under the same analytical framework. Whether an environment is categorized as traditional has little to do with the nature, origin, content, and validity of the things that are being transmitted. Buildings and settlements that were created across vastly different geographies, social contexts, and historical periods can be legitimately classified as traditional if the process of transmission figures into their making. Furthermore, whether the authors of the ideas and objects handed down are known or anonymous has little bearing on whether a dwelling or a settlement is considered traditional. Similarly, the circumstances in which a thing or idea is received; the duration of the process of transmission; the degree to which a tradition is questioned, contested, or passively received by the recipients factors less in the definition of tradition than the process of transmission (Shils 1981).

Early theories of the vernacular and the traditional, as it relates to the study of built space, were much more concerned with the object that was being transmitted. Some have argued that the transmission of traditions is inextricably linked to the physical object that is being transmitted (Oliver 1989). From this perspective, the definition of transmission is object-based and is conceived as the opposite of change. But the transmission of traditions rests not so much in the continuing life of material objects or even in the transmission of techniques and rituals from one generation to the other. Rather it rests in the sustenance of certain ideas.

An exclusive focus on the transmitted object falls short of historicizing particular traditional environments and situating them in the sociopolitical context at a given moment in time. But subsequent scholarly interest in the process of transmission began to focus on the larger structures of meaning that are transmitted from one generation to the other, and the various methods through which transmission is performed. Oral transmission is common in traditional societies, but some scholars also highlight dance, music, carving, mimicking, and other forms of non-oral expression as having direct bearing on the built environment. While the action of transmission ultimately vanishes as soon as it is performed, it is the process of transmission that maintains traditions. The transmissible elements are buildings, artifacts, crafts, settlements, rituals, beliefs, and practices, which are integral to the process of transmission. However, it is the meaning behind this process that is of ultimate importance, and that regulates, constrains, and directs the recurring enactment of the same process (Shils 1981:12).

Some highlight a problematic side of theories of transmission: “the emphasis on formulaic oral transmission” and the notion that such practice comes at the expense of “creativity” and “argument” (Oliver 1989). The chain of transmission and the genesis of tradition can be located in the uncritical acceptance of norms of behavior, thereby perpetuating preconceived ideas about the unchanging nature of tradition. But transmission is also a way of handing down and testing knowledge through trial and error. For example, many architects of the modernist era have sought to adapt traditional and vernacular building practices to contemporary needs. Architects such as Hassan Fathy in Egypt attempted to critically reinterpret traditional Nubian mud construction and the house layouts of medieval Cairo and Nubian villages, and sought to adapt them to contemporary conditions. He used the mass of adobe walls and the central courtyard

layout to design homes that incorporated passive cooling. As a modernist, Fathy was not interested to revive or to preserve the historical styles and building knowledge of the past, but to critically reinterpret it. Thus, transmission is essentially the transmission of know-how, and in many cases a reinterpretation of tradition, a way of rethinking human habitat in order to respond to increasing environmental degradation. As such, tradition is not so much an instrument preventing change, but one that incorporates change in order to sustain itself through space and time.

## 2.2. Tradition as Constraint

Some scholars have defined tradition as a practice reflecting the absence of choice. Tradition is inseparable from constraints—physical, economic, climatic, and psychological—which leads to the creation and preservation of traditions. This interpretation adds complexity to the basic definition of tradition by coupling the idea of transmission with the notion of “constraint,” based on the assumption that choice is limited in traditional societies. For example, the layout and form of traditional environments is determined by the availability of local materials and labor, by climate, scarcity, religion, or various social circumstances (Tuan 1989 27-34). From this perspective, the practice that emerges in the absence of choice becomes tradition by virtue of its reproduction by successive generations. Conversely, choice—a marker of modernity—is at odds with the idea of tradition. In modern societies the exercise of “choice” coupled with consumerism and the seemingly unlimited variety of the global economy has replaced many of the constraints traditional societies faced. As noted earlier, tradition in its basic definition is a neutral term, insofar as it does not examine transmission through the perspective of the distribution and reception of that which is being transmitted. But the notion of tradition as constraint allows us to better understand the reception side of transmission. Thus, some argue that the inability to choose and the possibility of waiting is what provide value to an object or a practice. Unique to this concept is the introduction of time and of waiting to the definition of tradition. The value attached is the element of “traditionality” sanctioned by history or nature itself, which is why some have argued that tradition is something that we value and pass on (Ibid. 1989).

## 3. Methodological Approaches to the Study of Traditional Environments

Early studies of traditional environments tended to focus primarily on the formal and structural dimension of the building process. With the increased attention to methodologies of interpretation emerged a rich body of critical scholarship that focused on the ways in which knowledge about traditional societies is produced and circulated. Socio-historical and material-cultural approaches to the study of traditional environments allowed for a better exploration of architectural form in its relation to systems of values. However, this formalist approach tended to use architecture and formal characteristics as mere evidence for symbolic and ritual practices of traditional societies. Thus, interdisciplinary approaches bring an added complexity and reflexivity to the study of traditional environments by taking into account multiple scales of analysis and recognizing that definitions are limited by method.

Defining the study of traditional dwellings and settlements less by subject than by method allows us to analyze traditional dwellings and settlements together with the meanings of the traditions they embody. Some have divided the methods of studying vernacular architecture into four avenues of inquiry: object-oriented studies, socially-oriented studies, culturally-oriented studies, and symbolically-oriented studies (Upton 1993). The object-oriented approach uses objects such as built artifacts and settlements to explain history and society. Thus, object-oriented studies are concerned not only with wide varieties of artifacts and buildings set within particular social and historical contexts, but also with the larger structures of signification used by the creators of traditional environments.

While this approach tries to interpret the intention of a dwelling's creator, the socially-oriented approach is concerned with overall social history, letting the study of society and history explain material culture. Culturally and symbolically-oriented studies focus on the study of dwelling typologies set within certain socio-cultural and historic contexts, with the purpose of uncovering the enduring values of their builders and the symbols that signify deeper structures of society. A possible fifth avenue of inquiry is that of "design-oriented studies," which includes the work of design professionals, but is not limited to them. Proponents of this approach seek better ways of understanding buildings practices of the past without accepting a simplistic return to earlier traditions. Design-oriented studies are concerned with redefining and reviving regional identity, and adapting traditions and practices of the past to contemporary needs. While the above five methodological approaches have been largely used to examine American vernacular environments, one can easily apply such approaches to traditional dwellings and settlements around the world (Upton 1993).

The study of traditional environments requires interdisciplinary methodological approaches. Disciplines such as anthropology, architecture, archaeology, behavioral, and structural approaches among others use different lenses to understand the ways and means by which people build dwellings, and the symbolism and utilitarianism involved in building and conceptualizing these structures.

Such varying approaches to studying traditional dwellings and settlements point to the fact that elaborate methods and meanings dictate the form and process by which dwellings are constructed. No approach that privileges formal, physical, metaphysical, or socio-cultural approaches can account for the symbolic, aesthetic, and polysemic richness of traditional environments. Factors such as culture, religion, gender relations, privacy matters, climate, security, economic conditions, and so forth intersect to produce dwellings that become part of the popular culture of a place.

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