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ARCHITECTURE BY THE PEOPLE

Above Cameroon: The picture shows a 'Saré' house, as the occupants call it, in the city of Ngaoundéré in the north of the country. It is covered with straw and belongs to the tribal chief.

Text by Bernard Rudofsky.
Photos by Yoshio Komatsu.

Architecture without Architects – A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture was the name given by the Museum of Modern Art New York to the exhibition on the research work of the architect Bernard Rudofsky, in 1964. In the following piece, taken from the exhibition catalogue, Rudofsky introduces the reader to a fascinating topic which is as relevant today as it was in the past.

ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY, AS WRITTEN and taught in the Western world, has never been concerned with more than a few select cultures. In terms of space it comprises but a small part of the globe – Europe, stretches of Egypt and Anatolia – or little more than was known in the second century A.D. Moreover, the evolution of architecture is usually dealt with only in its late phases. Skipping the first fifty centuries, chroniclers present us with a full-dress pageant of 'formal' architecture, as arbitrary a way of introducing the art of building as, say, dating the birth of music with the advent of the symphony orchestra. Although the dismissal of the early stages can be explained, though not excused, by the scarcity of architectural monuments, the discriminative approach of the historian is mostly due to his parochialism. Besides, architectural history as we know it is equally biased on the social plane. It amounts to little more than a who's who of architects who commemorated power and wealth; an anthology of buildings of, by, and for the privileged – the houses of true and false gods, of merchant princes and princes of the blood – with never a word about the houses of lesser people. Such preoccupation with noble architecture and architectural nobility to the exclusion of all other kinds may have been understandable as late as a generation ago, when the relics and ruins of ancient buildings served the architect as his sole models of excellence (to which he helped himself as a matter of course and convenience). But today, when the copying of historical forms is on the wane, when banking houses or railroad stations do not necessarily have to resemble prayers in stone to inspire confidence, such self-imposed limitation appears absurd.

Architecture Without Architects attempts to break down our narrow concepts of the art of building by introducing the unfamiliar world of non-pedigreed architecture. It is so little known that we don't even have a name for it. For want of a generic label, we shall call it vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural, as the case may be. Unfortunately, our view of the total picture of anonymous architecture is distorted by a shortage of documents, visual and otherwise. Whereas we are reasonably well informed about the artistic objectives and technical proficiency of painters who lived 30,000 years before our time, archaeologists consider themselves lucky when they stumble over the vestiges of a town that goes back to the

third millennium B.C. only. Since the question of the beginnings of architecture is not only legitimate but bears heavily on the theme of the exhibition, it is only proper to allude, even if cursorily, to possible sources.

A nation that swears by the Bible also finds it an incomparable book of reference. Alas, the explicitness of the scriptures in matters of architecture is never as disconcerting as when we learn (Genesis IV: 17) that Adam's son Cain built a city and named it after his son Enoch. A one-family town, delightful as it sounds, is a most extravagant venture and surely was never repeated in the course of history. If it proves anything, it illustrates the breathtaking progress made within a single generation, from the blessed hummingbird existence in well-supplied Paradise to the exasperatingly complicated organism that is a town. Sceptics who dismiss Enoch as a chimera will find more significance in the Ark, particularly in view of the fact that it was commissioned by the Lord Himself and built to His specifications. The question whether the Ark ought to be called a building or a nautical craft is redundant. The Ark had no keel, the keel being an intellectual invention of later days, and we may safely assume that ships were not known as yet, since their existence would have defeated the very purpose of the Flood. When Noah landed on Mount Ararat he was 601 years old, a man past his prime. He preferred to devote the rest of his life to viticulture and left the task of building to his sons. The Bible mentions (Genesis IX: 27) Shem's huts – probably put together with some of the Ark's lumber – but the decline in architecture was sealed.

The impious who prefer to turn to science in their quest for the origins of architecture will have to swallow a few indigestible facts. For it seems that long before the first enterprising man bent some twigs into a leaky roof, many animals were already accomplished builders. It is unlikely that beavers got the idea of building dams by watching human dam-builders at work. It probably was the other way. Most likely, man got his first incentive to put up a shelter from his cousins, the anthropomorphous apes. Darwin observed that the orang in the islands of the Far East, and the chimpanzees in Africa, build platforms on which they sleep, "and, as both species follow the same habit, it might be argued that this was due to instinct, but we cannot feel sure that it is not the result



Left Nepal: the main material used for the houses in the Nepalese mountain village Dhampus, is slate. It is used in partially white-washed walls and for the roofs. Windows, supports and roof brackets are made of carved wood.

Opposite Mongolia: in Mongolia, the yurts are called 'gers'. Felt covers on an artistically decorated wood construction protect the interior against the weather. The ring-shaped opening of the single-family tent remains open for ventilation and acts as a natural source of light.



of both animals having similar wants, and possessing similar powers of reasoning." Untamed apes do not share man's urge to seek shelter in a natural cave, or under an overhanging rock, but prefer an airy scaffolding of their own making. At another point in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin writes that "the orang is known to cover itself at night with the leaves of the Pandanus"; and Brehm noted that one of his baboons "used to protect itself from the heat of the sun by throwing a straw-mat over his head. In these habits," he conjectured, "we probably see the first steps towards some of the simpler arts, such as rude architecture and dress, as they arise among the early progenitors of man." Suburban man falling asleep near his lawn mower, pulling a section of his Sunday paper over his head, thus re-enacts the birth of architecture.

Yet even before men and beasts walked the earth, there existed some kind of architecture, coarsely modeled by the primeval forces of creation and occasionally polished by wind and water into elegant structures. Natural caves, especially, hold a great fascination for us. Caves, having been among man's earliest shelters, may turn out to be his last ones. At any rate, they were chosen with great foresight as depositories for our most precious artefacts—government and business files. It is of course not within the scope of this exhibition to furnish a capsule history of non-pedigreed architecture, nor even a sketchy typology. It merely should help us to free ourselves from our narrow world of official and commercial architecture.

Although exotic arts have long been appreciated in the Western world—not, however, without being cautiously dubbed 'primitive'—exotic architecture (the word exotic is here used in its original meaning, alien) has evoked no response and is still relegated to the pages of geographic and anthropological magazines. Indeed, apart from a few regional studies and scattered notes, no literature exists on the subject. Lately though, ever since the art of traveling has suffered conversion into an industry, the charms of 'picture-postcard towns' and the 'popular' architecture of 'fairy-tale countries' have proved of considerable attraction. Still, our attitude is plainly condescending.

No doubt the picturesque element abounds in our photographs, yet, again, the exhibition is not an exercise in quaintness nor a travel guide, except in the sense that it marks a point of departure for the exploration of our architectural prejudices.

It is frankly polemic, comparing as it does, if only by implication, the serenity of the architecture in so-called underdeveloped countries with the architectural blight in industrial countries. In orthodox architectural history, the emphasis is on the work of the individual architect; here the accent is on communal enterprise. Pietro Belluschi defined communal architecture as 'a communal art, not produced by a few intellectuals or specialists but by the spontaneous and continuing activity of a whole people with a common heritage, acting under a community of experience.' It may be argued that this art has no place in a raw civilization, but even so, the lesson to be derived from this architecture need not be completely lost to us.

There is much to learn from architecture before it became an expert's art. The untutored builders in space and time—the protagonists of this show—demonstrate an admirable talent for fitting their buildings into the natural surroundings. Instead of trying to 'conquer' nature, as we do, they welcome the vagaries of climate and the challenge of topography. Whereas we find flat, featureless country most to our liking (any flaws in the terrain are easily erased by the application of a bulldozer), more sophisticated people are attracted by rugged country. In fact, they do not hesitate to seek out the most complicated configurations in the landscape. The most sanguine of them have been known to choose veritable eyries for their building sites—Machu Picchu, Monte Alban, the craggy bastions of the monks' republic on Mount Athos, to mention only some familiar ones.

The tendency to build on sites of difficult access can be traced no doubt to a desire for security but perhaps even more so to the need of defining a community's borders. In the old world, many towns are still solidly enclosed by moats, lagoons, glacis, or walls that have long lost their defensive value. Although the walls present no hurdles to invaders, they help to thwart undesirable expansion. The very word urbanity is linked to them, the Latin *urbs* meaning walled town. Hence, a town that aspires to being a work of art must be as finite as a painting, a book, or a piece of music. Innocent as we are of this sort of planned parenthood in the field of urbanistics, we exhaust ourselves in architectural proliferation. Our towns, with their air of futility, grow unchecked—an architectural eczema that



defies all treatment. Ignorant as we are of the duties and privileges of people who live in older civilizations, acquiesce as we do in accepting chaos and ugliness as our foreordained fate, we neutralize any and all misgivings about the inroads of architecture on our lives with lame protests directed at nobody in particular.

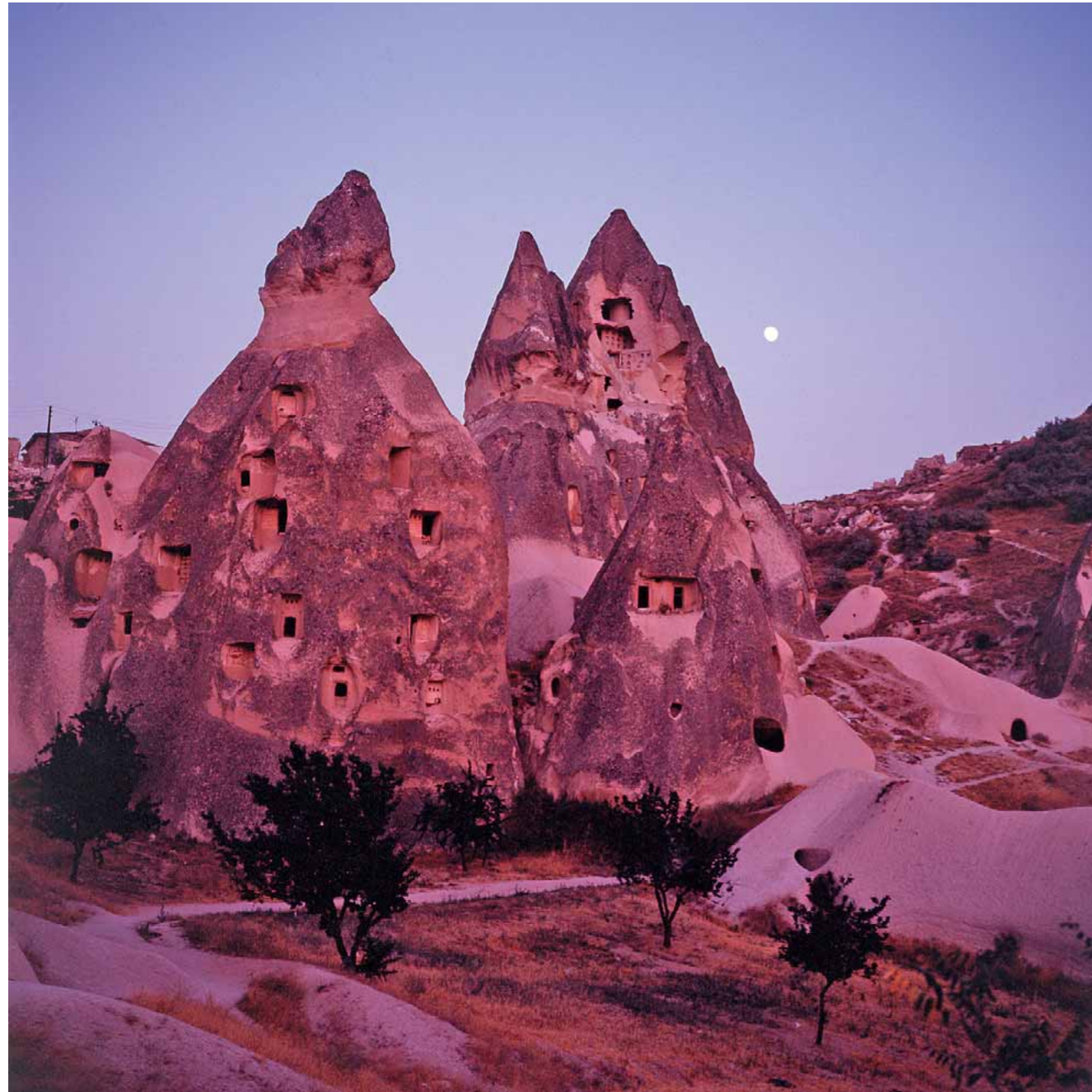
Part of our troubles results from the tendency to ascribe to architects—or, for that matter, to all specialists—exceptional insight into problems of living when, in truth, most of them are concerned with problems of business and prestige. Besides, the art of living is neither taught nor encouraged in this country. We look at it as a form of debauch, little aware that its tenets are frugality, cleanliness, and a general respect for creation, not to mention Creation.

To no small degree, this situation came about through the diligence of the historian. By invariably emphasizing the parts played by architects and their patrons he has obscured the talents and achievements of the anonymous builders, men whose concepts sometimes verge on the utopian, whose esthetics approach the sublime. The beauty of this architecture has long been dismissed as accidental, but today we should be able to recognize it as the result of rare good sense in the handling of practical problems. The shapes of the houses, sometimes transmitted through a hundred generations, seem eternally valid, like those of their tools.

Above all, it is the *humaneness* of this architecture that ought to bring forth some response in us. For instance, it simply never occurs to us to make streets into oases rather than deserts. In countries where their function has not yet deteriorated into highways and parking lots, a number of arrangements make streets fit for humans: pergole and awnings (that is, awnings spread across a street), tent-like structures, or permanent roofs. All are characteristic of the Orient, or countries with an oriental heritage, like Spain. The most refined street coverings, a tangible expression of civic solidarity—or, should one say, of philanthropy—are arcades. Unknown and unappreciated in our latitudes, the function of this singularly ingratiating feature goes far beyond providing shelter against the elements or protecting pedestrians from traffic hazards. Apart from lending unity to the streetscape, they often take the place of the ancient forums. Throughout Europe, North

From *Architecture Without Architects* by Bernard Rudofsky, copyright: © 1964 by Bernard Rudofsky. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random Hous, Inc.

The Austrian architect **Bernard Rudofsky** (Vienna 1905 – New York 1998) worked as a consultant to the Museum of Modern Art New York in the 1960s. During his many research trips and in his studies all round the globe, he documented informal houses, residential buildings and settlements which cannot be classified in the classical canon of architecture. Rudofsky was considered a sarcastic critic of western architecture. As a visionary and pioneer, he recognised the artistic and cultural wealth of traditional peoples who were disrespectfully referred to as 'primitive'.



Left Indonesia: The houses of the Baju on the coast of the island Sulawesi are made of mangroves. The roofs are covered with palm leaves. The people live from the cultivation and sale of sea algae.

Opposite Turkey: pointed rocks characterise Cappadocia's landscape. The rock is of volcanic origin and is therefore soft and easy to shape. There are fewer and fewer people living in the houses cut out of the rocks. In the fourth and fifth century, the main settlers here were Christian monks.

Africa and Asia, arcades are a common sight because they also have been incorporated into 'formal' architecture. Bologna's streets, to cite but one example, are accompanied by nearly twenty miles of *portici*.

Another alien type of the communal vernacular is the storehouse for food. In societies where food is looked upon as a divine gift rather than an industrial product, the architecture of granaries is solemn. So much so that to the uninitiated it suggests ecclesiastical buildings. Although small in scale, storehouses achieve monumentality, whether in the Iberian peninsula, in the Sudan, or in Japan. In view of their great stylistic purity and precious content, we have termed them quasi-sacral.

Apart from the High Vernacular – the sophisticated *minor* architecture of Central Europe, the Mediterranean, South and East Asia – and primitive architecture proper, the exhibition also includes such categories as architecture by subtraction, or sculpted architecture, exemplified by troglodyte dwellings and free-standing buildings cut from live rock and hollowed out. Rudimentary architecture is represented by wind screens which sometimes attain gigantic dimensions. In Japan they may shield, indeed, envelop a house, a hamlet, or an entire village. Of the architecture of nomads, portable houses, houses on wheels, sled-houses, houseboats, and tents are shown. Proto-industrial architecture includes water wheels, windmills, both vertical and horizontal, and dovecots, those vital fertilizer plants. Being 'contemptuous of ideas but amorous of devices,' we may find the mechanics rather than the aesthetics of this architecture more to our liking.

We learn that many audacious 'primitive' solutions anticipate our cumbersome technology; that many a feature invented in recent years is old hat in vernacular architecture – prefabrication, standardization of building components, flexible and movable structures, and, more especially, floor-heating, air-conditioning, light control, even elevators. We may also compare the amenities of our houses with the unadvertised comfort of, say, some African domestic architecture that provides a respectable man with six detached dwellings for his six wives. Or we may find that long before modern architects envisioned subterranean towns under the optimistic assumption that they may protect us from the dangers of future warfare, such towns existed, and still exist, on more than one continent.

There is a good deal of irony in the fact that to stave off physical and mental deterioration the urban dweller periodically escapes his splendidly appointed lair to seek bliss in what he thinks are primitive surroundings: a cabin, a tent, or, if he is less hidebound, a fishing village or hill town abroad. Despite his mania for mechanical comfort, his chances for finding relaxation hinge on its very absence. By dint of logic, life in old-world communities is singularly privileged. Instead of several hours of daily travel, only a flight of steps may separate a man's workshop or study from his living quarters. Since he himself helped to shape and preserve his environment, he never seems to tire of it. Besides, he is largely indifferent to 'improvements'. Just as a child's toys are no substitute for human affection, to him no technical contrivance makes amends for the lack of viability.

Not only is the need for confining the growth of a community well understood by the anonymous builders, it is matched by their understanding of the limits of architecture itself. They rarely subordinate the general welfare to the pursuit of profit and progress. In this respect, they share the beliefs of the professional philosopher. To quote Huizinga, "the expectation that every new discovery or refinement of existing means must contain the promise of higher values or greater, happiness is an extremely naive thought. ... It is not in the least paradoxical to say that a culture may founder on real and tangible progress."

The present exhibition is a preview of a book on the subject, the vehicle of the idea that the philosophy and know-how of the anonymous builders presents the largest untapped source of architectural inspiration for industrial man. The wisdom to be derived goes beyond economic and esthetic considerations, for it touches the far tougher and increasingly troublesome problem of how to live and let live, how to keep peace with one's neighbors, both in the parochial and universal sense.