

Home-grown Architecture... Towards a new Vernacular

The Northwest Branch Day Conference took place on 15th October 2015 at the Friends Meeting House, in Manchester. Delegates were welcomed by Paul Hartley, the IHBC NW branch Chair. Hartley began the conference with a tribute to Ron Brunskill, the architectural historian whose many studies into vernacular buildings had stimulated interest in their conservation. Brunskill had died on 9th October - a few days before the conference. So it was fitting that a day conference was taking place in Manchester, looking at vernacular architecture. The conference was chaired by Marion Barter, from the Architectural heritage Practice (AHP).

The Day Conference began with a keynote speaker: Dr Marcel Vellinga, Director of the Place, Culture and Identity research group at Oxford Brookes University. His presentation was entitled: *Re-imagining vernacularity*.

Vellinga explained that the definition of vernacular architecture was contested and disputed. Ideas and terms were used like, indigenous and traditional, but there was no commonly accepted definition. Despite this difficulty, the phrase was widely used and had various associations. For example, it was associated with rural buildings and the notion of regional folk tradition. The latter association was linked to fears or to negative feelings towards: industrialisation, urbanisation and modernism; effectively, it was associated with the rural idyll rather than modern living.

After the 19th century ideas of rural and self-sufficiency became linked. So what is described as vernacular does change. This is part of the nature of living in a more dynamic and political environment. Dichotomies like rural versus urban, or modern versus traditional, represent limited views of the world whereas in reality often the distinctions can be blurred.

20th century conceptions of vernacular tend to depict such buildings as being: rural, historic, pre-industrial, agricultural. Such buildings would include barns and one that had been built in the local tradition of a given location. So in this common conception the idea of the rural idyll was represented by a homogeneous rural vernacular as distinct from the modern/urban situation.

Vellinga thought such conceptions were influenced by anthropological concepts such as culturalism and structuralism. The conception of vernacular, as described above, was influenced by the concept of one place – one culture - one vernacular. He thought this conception was framed by the context of growing globalism and urbanism and the perception this was leading to the loss of traditional vernacular.

At the end of the 20th century this meant vernacular studies faced a predicament: authentic vernacular examples were hard to find. The studies were conservative in nature: they lamented the loss of materials and skills; and they focussed on pre-industrial buildings. It was similar in other parts of the world.

Vernacular studies were exclusive as well: non authentic aspects and examples were omitted. Vellinga felt that the notions of vernacular has a historic affinity: it is nothing to do with the future.

In late 20th century anthropology thinking, place, cultures and materials were not static or place bound. Cultures change and the different experiences of urban and rural and of modern and traditional begin to merge. Where change has come it was not just a result of decolonisation and/or modernisation: many traditions were shared by different groups and could be found in different places. Immigration had seen traditions and cultural ideas spread to new places and the coming of the railways had had an impact over the years, as well. Cultural change was adaptive and heterogeneous. The only constant was that culture was not static.

There were variations in and between countries: e.g. in the UK many rural barns had been converted, whereas in France rural/agricultural buildings had been abandoned. This was partly a cultural issue but partly because some buildings are easier to maintain and/or adapt to new uses than others. Tourism was another dimension in the story of vernacular buildings. Some building technology was difficult to learn and some buildings more comfortable to live in.

The most obvious impact of climate change was environmental. There had been disasters and responses, but the outcomes of such endeavours had been political, economic and social. Through history political conflict had resulted in destruction, which had led to conservation projects. Social change(s) have affected places in various ways: some places have seen gentrification and medical advances have seen the rise of an ageing populations in many countries with increasing number of elderly people. Other changes have been due to the economy or insurance or mortgages. Policy has had an effect, for example health and safety.

Therefore the issue of vernacular buildings is more complex: it links to cultural context in a dynamic way. Research into this area was promising, but the issue was whether vernacular buildings had become commodified or could be a new inspiration. This questions was underpinned by qualities and values. Vernacular architecture was still important due to its links with the qualities and values of locality and honesty.

Questions about vernacular architecture inevitably led to other questions, such as: what is architecture? In trying to provide answers simple dichotomies were inadequate. The nature of vernacular architecture was a result of cultural assumptions and history. It was also an outcome of elitism: vernacular architecture as opposed to (real) architecture.

Vellinga concluded by saying that there were many ways to conserve buildings and there are many ways to design them. He told delegates we need to accept that culture is not static: places change and so does technology. So the situation is more complex and dynamic than it may appear. The contribution of vernacular architecture can best be understood in terms of its contribution to conservation and to design.

After this introduction, there were three presentations on the subject of *Vernacular Architecture*: two speakers focussed on the North West of England and the other on Wales. Peter Messenger made the first presentation of the three.

Messenger began by expressing his sadness at the loss of Ron Brunskill and underlining the architectural historian's importance to our understanding of vernacular buildings. Messenger had graduated with an MA Vernacular Architecture, from the University of Manchester, where he had studied under Brunskill.

In his career Messenger has worked for various local authorities and other bodies: at one point he worked on an extensive survey of Clay Buildings on the Solway Plain, for Oxford Archaeology North, which resulted in an English Heritage funded programme. Messenger's presentation was entitled: *Cumbrian Vernacular*.

He started by addressing the 'cliché' that vernacular buildings "seem to grow out of the ground." In Cumbria's there were many 'useful buildings stones' and the county's vernacular architecture had largely been constructed using such materials: since they were relatively cheap and easy to obtain. So the buildings were built using local sandstone, gritstone and slate that had been buried under boulder clay. This was what vernacular architecture was all about, Messenger said, using building materials that were close at hand including the earth itself. He referred to Brunskill's vernacular threshold and said that there were few remaining peasant's houses or early houses.

Slate had been used in vernacular building: to construction the walls as well being a roofing material.

Sandstone had been used widely in Cumbria, although the quality tended to vary and where it was used in exposed positions on a building the material suffered from severe weathering. The walls tended to have been lime washed, even when the sandstone that had been used appeared to have even good quality, and this meant some of the detail was hidden. The roofs were often stone flags and the coping stone and ridges were in sandstone.

Cobble walls were common in the centre of the county. Low House farm, in Newlands Valley, was cited as a typical example, where the house had been rendered but the barn had not: the barn was built out of boulders and cobble with slate used to level the courses.

In Carlisle many timber framed buildings had been constructed, in the Middle Ages. In the 14th and 15th century, however, there had been several fires and many buildings had been destroyed. Some fires had been caused by Scots, but others by locals. For example, in 1392 one man had sold a house and his son felt as if he had lost his inheritance, so the son had burned the house down.

The Guildhall had been built c1400, after a fire which had destroyed a third of the buildings in the city. Messenger said it was the only substantial timber framed building that had survived. Although the Guildhall was one building, the roof had been built using two distinct methods of construction: one part had deep bays and raking queen post trusses, whereas the

other had narrower bays and a crown post roof. A 19th century drawing of the Guildhall by Ruskin survived, which showed two 15th century timber, tracery windows, on the first floor.

Messenger moved on to look at vernacular buildings in Cumbria that were examples of earth construction: locally these buildings are often referred to as clay dabbins. Clay walling had been described as: “the short lived material.” It was often covered with lime, render, brick or stone and was only exposed if it collapsed and pushed the skin out. What remained of the building would be whatever was being supported by the internal structure. Other examples of earth buildings that had survived in North Cumbria were looked at to show how traditions had slowly adapted through time.

The point was made that clay dabbins were not only found on the Solway Plain. Some of these buildings survived in the Eden Valley. Some had been remodelled and some had no traditional detailing. In some earth buildings there was evidence of where shuttering had been used: the fact that pisé de terre had been employed was not common knowledge before the surviving evidence was discovered recently.

Brickwork was reintroduced to Cumbria in the late 17th century by the Lowther family. Brackenhill Tower was an example of an early brick cottage. This was the home of a member of the Graham Clan and hence the cottage was attached to a tower. Adjacent to the cottage was an apparently simple barn, built of handmade bricks on a rubble plinth. Messenger showed photographs of the barn’s ‘experimental side wall’: the brick bonding was not readily identifiable.

Messenger gave the delegates a brief historical context. In 1066 Cumbria was part of Scotland. It did not become part of England until 1092, when the border moved from being south of Kendal to being north of Carlisle.

The area closest to the border was fought over for the six hundred years, which obviously had a huge impact on the lives of the local people and the vernacular buildings. In the villages and towns that were frequently attacked, buildings were destroyed. Understandably many defensive buildings were constructed at this time and it is examples of tower houses, stone houses and bastles that have survived the longest. Askerton Castle, Brackenhill Tower and the Bastle at Raughtonhead are examples of defensive buildings and delegates were show photographs of their construction and detailing.

The Union of the Crowns in 1603 ushered in a ‘quieter period’ of history for the area. The 17th and 18th centuries saw most buildings being constructed in a plain and simple vernacular style. The buildings were heavily lime rendered to protect them against the climate, with simple details for window and door surrounds and exposed quoins.

Some vernacular buildings dating from later in the 17th century included slightly different features: for example large bank barns with unrendered rubble walling. Some tower houses were remodelled in this period. Rather than defensible features being built, there is evidence of architectural statements being added to buildings in this period.

The next speaker was Trefor Thorpe, a registered conservation architect and former Chief Architect at Cadw. His presentation was entitled: *Welsh Vernacular*. Thorpe began by asking whether Wales had a regional vernacular that was different from the rest of the UK. He said the answer was “six of one and six of the other.”

The vernacular architecture of an area was influenced by the building materials that were available. Other influences included the environment and the weather: Thorpe pointed out that the environment across Wales was very varied. Culture and local traditions were important in defining vernacular architecture too: this had been much clearer before the coming of the railways. Although all these influences could be cited Thorpe said that “vernacular was a murky concept.”

The climate in Wales was essentially a maritime one and in terms of weather it rained a lot. So buildings got wet and that meant materials like timber and straw could be prone to rot and decay. Earth building could be vulnerable in such a climate too - since earth washed away when it rained a lot - unless such buildings were well maintained.

There were no traditional domestic buildings that had survived from before the 15th century. Much of the central area of Wales had been covered with broad leaved forests: so timber was readily available, but there was little stone.

Thorpe cited a seminal study of Welsh vernacular buildings: Peter Smith (1975) *Houses of the Welsh Countryside*. In the book Smith had demonstrated the distribution of vernacular buildings in Wales and he had concluded that there was no uniform vernacular in the country.

A relatively new view was that Wales is not a highland region of the UK, since there are a lot of lowlands and valleys. The hall house had been identified as a common theme, but there had been geographical variations and different traditions. In the post-railways eras imported styles had been identified: there were local idiosyncrasies and examples of new materials being used in old styles. Delegates were shown some examples to illustrate these ideas.

Thorpe then focussed on the Snowdonia House, which was the first example of a hall house that had developed into a storied house. Carreg-fawr Farmhouse, from Waunfawr in Gwynedd and the Llainfaydn slate man’s cottage, from Rhostryfan in Caernarfonshire each told part of this story and they were now both in the Museum of Welsh life at St Fagans.

In east Wales where timber had been readily available there had been hall houses with cruck frames. In the south west there had been hall house and long house including byres. In these houses a central fire location had been dominant. There were examples of peasant halls and barns that had been just butted onto house. In the west the available timber had been poor quality and there had been a culture of poverty, but there had been buildings with wicker chimney structures for the fires. In recent times there had been a resurgence of thatching skills too, but the debates here had focussed on traditional style versus chocolate box style.

One recent trend had been the increasing number of vernacular buildings being used as holiday lets, which were proving to be very popular with city dwellers. On a positive note using these vernacular buildings as holiday lets meant an active reuse had been found. Griff

Rhys Jones had been promoting the conservation and reuse of vernacular buildings in Wales and the Prince of Wales had been involved in a 'regal restoration' which had included a 'police bobby's house'.

Thorpe cited the notion of the vernacular terrace that had been adopted in the 19th century to build workers houses in towns. He showed an example of a new vernacular design: Ty Unnos, in Ebbw Vale - a Welsh Passivhaus that he described as "a reinterpretation of the Welsh longhouse in the 21st century." He looked at volume housing in Swansea and asked whether they were examples of 'contemporary vernacular or not.

It was important to look at conservation areas: these places all had their local idiosyncrasies which often gave them their sense of place and local distinctiveness. Studying them could inform development and planning.

The final part of the presentation focussed on examples of new vernacular: delegates were shown an eco-house that had been developed from a traditional building and had not required planning permission or Building Regulations approval; and other examples where new builds involving traditional timber construction.

There were examples of new conversions and/or adaptations which incorporated some modern sustainable technology. There were also examples of pseudo traditional buildings and of modern design echoing vernacular tradition.

Having shown the delegates these examples, Thorpe finished by asking the question: "why can't we manage to achieve a new vernacular?"

The third speaker in this section was Chris O'Flaherty, Course Leader of the MSc Building Conservation & Adaptation at the University of Central Lancashire. His presentation was entitled: *Lancashire Vernacular – A Case Study of the Fylde*.

O'Flaherty began his presentation with a short tribute to Nigel Morgan, who had been a leading architectural historian in Lancashire and someone with whom O'Flaherty had worked. He then moved on to introduce the Fylde. The prominent features of the land in the Fylde were the rivers and estuaries. Delegates were told that not much predated 1600 in the area: John Speed's 1610 map simply showed numerous small and dispersed agricultural settlements; and in his survey of 1586 Camden had found it "an in hospitable land".

Rather than the oldest child in a family inheriting land, the land had been split between siblings: this had resulted in the prevalence of many small farms. Some of the land was moss land and some of it was sand dunes. In the late 16th century there was extensive drainage of the mosses: the peaty top soil would be dried and used as fuel for the fires.

O'Flaherty referred delegates to two local studies – a book by Kathleen Eyre (1970) *Fylde Folk: Moss or Sand* and a paper by the Centre for North-West Regional Studies, at the University of Lancaster, *Traditional Houses of the Fylde*. According to Eyre, the people of the Fylde were known as "the Moss'ogs" and they were backward people which she attributed to "pestilence, poor harvests, ignorance, superstition and isolation. Sobriety was not common

and the area was known as the Badlands. Also the land suffered from flooding: for example in 1720 when an extensive area of land was devastated and 175 houses were lost.

Early houses were cruck frames built on cobble plinths, but in later buildings load bearing perimeter walls were constructed in brick or cobble, with load bearing internal cross walls and gables. At Hougher Fall Farm, the cruck truss has been dendro-dated to 1570. The houses that were built in the mosses were called field houses and a typical example from Pilling was a cruck frame construction dating from 1632.

The walls in the early houses - above the plinth and up to wall plate - were 'clam-staff and daub': in earth walling known as puddle clay. The roof covering was rushed grass sods. Wet thatching was employed with wheated straw. The process involved layers of threshed straw being 'degged' with water and compressed then stripped. The roof was finished with a puddle clay ridge. The roof coverings were commonly replaced with corrugated sheeting and later with tiles and slates.

O'Flaherty then considered the plan form. In early houses people and animals were under the same roof. The separation, such as it was, involved the humans being at the top of the slope and the animals at the bottom. The typical Fylde longhouse had a shared entrance and 'crosswalk'. They were single storey with a single pile 'house-body' and a single bay plan. As the use of space evolved the plan form developed into three bays with various features being introduced such as: a fire place, baffle entry, a pantry and buttery. Obviously when upper storeys were introduced stairs were included

As a result of the impact of the 'Great Rebuilding' in the early 18th century, the high attrition rate of vernacular buildings in the Fylde and modernisation/adaptation over the years, the main surviving features tend to be the three bay plan forms with a baffle entry, as opposed to surviving traditional building materials. O'Flaherty suggested that the vernacular period seems to have come to an end in mid-18th century in the Fylde.

The presentation ended with a quick overview of building styles in the Fylde since the vernacular period. Lytham Hall, built in 1757, was cited as an example of polite architecture in the area. The coming of the railways in 19th century saw extensive development on the Fylde coast: Blackpool grew into a large seaside resort; Fleetwood was a planned resort and port designed by Decimus Burton; and Lytham was an early coastal health resort. Interestingly, as Lytham developed into a residential settlement for the middle classes the style of many of the houses was informed by a vernacular revival and some recent 21st century houses in the town have been designed to incorporate some vernacular details.

The final part of the morning comprised two presentations on *New Vernacular*. The first presentation was by Jasmin Eastwood and Astley Petitt, from APA Architects in the Isle of Man. Their presentation was entitled: *Traditional Dwellings – Contemporary Design*.

Petitt began by explaining that under Planning Policy in the Isle of Man it was possible to extend a building by 50% extra floor space. The existing floor space measurement excluded the basement, attic space and any out buildings. Design in rural areas is controlled by Planning Circular 3/91: *Guide to the Design of Residential Development in the Countryside*.

Manx Planning Policy (8.11.2) states: *“It is important that replacement dwellings should relate closely to the buildings they replace in terms of siting and size that the resulting visual impact is appropriate for the countryside, and that existing stone and slate are re-used.”* And 3/91 (p2) included the following policy paragraph: *“the removal or replacement of traditional elements including materials, windows or external works will generally not be acceptable. Works to buildings that date before 1920 should as far as practicable retain the original materials and form of the building.”*

Petitt said that people liked to build bungalows and there was a fear of the island becoming like Ireland where rural areas were dominated by bland modern bungalows. 3/91 sought to address this issue and protect the vernacular. He explained that 3/91 was written by Melville Dumbar Associates. Dumbar was co-author of the Essex Design Guide. 3/91 addresses design, siting, form and materials: including stone work with materials imported from Ireland – and taste – including recommended proportions for doors and windows.

Petitt said that the problem with 3/91 was that it only recognised two housing types: the ‘normal size’ type with a 5 window front elevation and another type (referred to as a rare extended version) with a 9 window front elevation. This had led to: “misplaced enthusiasm”, poor location and detail and issues of scale and monotony. What was needed was the freedom to develop new architectural styles.

Eastwood then talked about how she had looked at the Isle of Skye, which had a similar climate and landscape to the Isle of Man (IOM). In Skye different styles of contemporary architecture were evident whereas the IOM experience was just the 5 window and 9 window variations and both were essentially examples of pastiche.

Sheep had been introduced in Skye, since people had been removed from the landscape. The vernacular Skye house was a longhouse known as a black-house: a thatched house with stone walls, since trees were rare in the landscape.

Eastwood introduced the Hebridean Typologies, which included the Hebridean black-house, the white-house and the kit-house. In the Hebridean approach the whole house was preferred - since it provided better circulation. By contrast the kit-house did not fit into the landscape and it was not ‘tucked-away from the wind’ like the black-house’.

In Skye designers looked back at the black-house and also the black-shed and were developing contemporary interpretations. Eastwood underlined this by showing photographs of contemporary houses in Skye. She explained that with today’s lifestyle *local* covered a larger geographical area and in locations like Skye employment was no longer largely agricultural. The contemporary houses featured large glazed windows and their siting was more prominent: they stood out in the landscape rather than being tucked-in. They had less external detail/features; they were robust to avoid failure; and they had ‘feature interiors’.

Eastwood finished by making reference to the design guide *Rural Design Future Landscapes*, which was created in 2011 by Alan Dickson from Rural Design Architects from Skye, in conjunction with multiple architects and kit-house firms (including Dualchas). The guide

emphasised that siting and planning are as important as aesthetic design. Eastwood said architecture had influenced planning policy in Skye, which was the opposite of the IOM experience.

Architecture was the outcome of social and environmental conditions, she said. Dualchas was creating architecture that contributed to a sense of place and Rural Design was promoting a more transitional architecture.

The final presentation of the morning was by Jerry Spencer: a chartered planner, urban designer and heritage advisor, from Jerry Spencer Associates Ltd. in Cheshire. His presentation was entitled *Vernacular Urban Form and the Eden Design Guide*.

The growth of the car and new buildings like supermarkets were part of modern life. Local politics and Planning tended to be conservative, so Spencer had been commissioned to produce a design guide.

As an undergraduate, Spencer had studied urban geography at Glasgow and urban design at Westminster. He also had a post graduate diploma in Town Planning. His definition of vernacular was: how places evolved when their design and layout is controlled by the community rather than a higher authority.

Urban form was a key determinant: it was more significant than the form of most secular buildings. As an example, he cited Su Nuraxi, a nuragic settlement at Barumini in Sardinia. Here individual buildings were subsumed by the pre horse and cart urban form. The whole was greater than the sum of its parts. Consequently, Spencer thought that in order to achieve a revival of the vernacular, attention may need to be paid to the design of the urban form as much as the individual building.

The traditional house had a simple form, but it changed to suit individual needs. The huts on Vancouver Island were an example of this. Spencer then looked at squatter towns and asked whether they were vernacular. Certainly in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro buildings have been personalised by the colour of their elevations.

Spencer felt that with modern mixed use developments often the whole is not greater than the sum of its parts. Buildings do not enclose space: they were surrounded by space instead. This meant that space was not used and often the development was characterised by sporadic design.

Spencer contrasted vernacular urban form from modern mixed use developments. Vernacular urban form was influenced by available materials, the climate and the need for security. The buildings may be tightly clustered as a result of there being limited development land. The clustering may also be a response to the low mobility of residents. The way the buildings are arranged can very often help to define communal open space: for business, religious and social activity. There tends to be little variation in building typology, but there is a high level of adaptability and personalisation. With vernacular urban form the whole is almost always greater than the sum of the parts.

Spencer then looked at the changes in urban form in the western world. The discipline of Town Planning had become important. In recent times, large income differentials and widespread private car ownership had led to more widely spaced dwelling patterns and a more fragmented urban form. In modern times, individual dwelling(s) were the focus of an individual's life rather than the community. Wider spacing of dwellings has resulted in far less well defined urban spaces. There has been an increasing variation between dwellings which has led to the cohesion of the group being diminished.

The Eden Design Guide, had been created on behalf of Eden District Council, in Cumbria. The first step had been to understand the vernacular buildings and urban form of the district. Spencer reminded delegates that vernacular buildings respond to climate. He explained that buildings enclose space: this creates a sense of ownership; it enables people to move from place to place; and it is about compression and release.

This process of buildings enclosing space led to the idea of central space(s): for examples market squares. Buildings addressed the space and the space effectively became an outside room; doors front onto squares; and the vernacular appearance is characterised by there being little variation.

Certain issues arose when looking at the urban form of existing contemporary housing. The issues had been identified in a development at Crosby Ravensworth, for example. In this development only limited references to vernacular architectural styles were evident in the design of the houses; space was not enclosed in the development; no sense of connection has been created; and space was wasted at the entrance to the development.

The design guide advised against cul-de-sac developments, preferring to see developments being integrated into the existing urban form. In order to be integrated a development should link into the pattern of existing routes and it should be part of the settlement, rather than being located on the edge.

Developments needed to have a sense of enclosure. The guide recommended that parking should be in an undercroft, although some parking could be on the streets. Where there were water features, these should be integrated into the design, not be covered over and culverted. Buildings should address each other in a development and there should be some sort of sentinel to create a sense of arrival.

With vernacular houses and streets the urban form was basically the same: different materials were used depending on the locality and availability, but the key aspect was simplicity. By contrast, modern housing developments revelled in complexity; there was no balance, no symmetry and houses did not address the street.

The guide recommended building in stone and incorporating lintels, however, it advised against crazy paving. It contained advice with respect of barns. It pointed out that existing barns had openings and that old openings should be reopened so that the building still looked like a barn. There was advice about siting too, housing should be sited to fit into the landscape rather than stand out prominently.

The design guide also considered large commercial developments, like supermarkets. It recommended that the design should ensure car parking was at the side of the building, rather than being in front, which was too intrusive visually. Spencer cited the Sainsbury development in Penrith as a good example, because the design incorporated routes, shops and squares.

The presentation ended with a slide containing thoughts about the future of vernacular urban form. Urban form needed to address modern flexible working patterns and the geographical mobility they demanded. However, rather than simply targeting affluent professional households, urban form should address the needs of a wider range of household types - including lower income households and the increasing numbers of elderly households.

Spencer said it was likely that there would be lower levels of home ownership in coming years. House plots would be smaller and there would be greater use of kit-housing. Homes needed to be adaptable and we needed to see more single storey homes that were closely spaced together. A major sustainability issue was the need to encourage lower levels of car ownership: this could involve car free environments or car-pooling.

Before lunch there was a short question and answer session, chaired by Marion Barter. In the discussion the point was made that in Skye gaining planning permission was easier because they were trying to encourage new residents. In the Isle of Man, however, it was more difficult. The island was a tax haven and due to the number of incomers the threat of bungalows needed to be addressed and vernacular pastiche was the preferred option.

Jerry Springer responded by saying that places were the result of Planners and Planning. Planners had access to design guides, but he felt that there was too much emphasis on the appearance of buildings, but little on urban form. We needed to emphasise that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and not be overly concerned by appearance.

Conservation Area appraisals were also raised. These appraisals tended to highlight the character of individual building, but they contained very little on the character of the area as a whole. It was suggested that, in terms of urban design and conservation, concentrating on building materials should not be a major issue: it was far more important to concentrate on the character of the area as a whole.

The Q&A session ended with an attempt to say what new vernacular really was. The suggestion was that we should be encouraging local architecture and 'letting the vernacular fade'.

After lunch there were three tours on the theme of *Manchester's Lost Vernacular*. One tour comprised a visit to Chethams School and Library, which was led by Norman Redhead, from GMAAS. Another tour was a walking tour in the Northern Quarter looking at surviving vernacular, which was led by John Wynyard, from Manchester City Council. The other 'tour' was a session exploring vernacular in the Greater Manchester archive, in the Central Library.

When the delegates re assembled, Paul Hartley (IHBC NW Branch Chair) presented the *IHBC/RTPI North West Conservation Award 2015*. The winning scheme was the Northern

Warehouse, Titanic Hotel scheme in Stanley Dock, Liverpool. Although this had been a vast project the aims had been to create a destination whilst at the same time conserving the significance of the building. The scheme had been a great success and was as an example of good practice in heritage-led regeneration. The award was accepted on behalf of the project team by John Hinchliffe, of John Hinchliffe Associates.

The afternoon session included presentations on the theme of *Materials and Design*. The first presentation was by Richard Harris, Course Director for the MSc Timber Building Conservation at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum. His topic was *Timber*.

Harris began with the brief for his presentation, stressing the point about looking at how the vernacular is still developing today, without the influence of style or fashion. He then considered perceptions of the vernacular with a quote: "Vernacular architecture is fundamentally linked to cultural context." The quote was from Marcel Vellinga, who had made the key note presentation in the morning. Harris explored this theme by explaining what the quote meant. In the 18th century vernacular architecture tended to be primitive huts and was about the spirit of the place, whereas in the 19th century arguably it could be linked to the Picturesque and the idea of the rural idyll. He suggested that the Arts and Crafts Movement was the context for vernacular buildings in 20th century and asked whether the Eco home and "sustainability" were the context in the 21st century.

The question was: what comes next? It was important to understand how the vernacular had developed over time. Harris considered the issues of technology, availability of materials and climate and asked whether these were drivers or constraints. In identical conditions of technology, availability of materials and climate, the form and construction of vernacular buildings are determined by culture: so it was important to consider what culture was, how it was created and how it was transmitted.

There were certain aspects that defined our everyday culture: language, clothing, food, narrative and hierarchy. An example of cultural difference that Harris cited was how in German the verb came at the end of the sentence. Culture depends on a system or rules of procedure. The rules themselves are essentially arbitrary, however, so we should not ask why.

Builders were not problem solvers, but buildings were solutions. Harris talked about how we translated trees into a beams and asked: which way up is a post? In the UK we turned them upside down, but in Japan they had them the right way up. The question of form was related to status: wings, gables and chevrons were examples of this. There was a hierarchy of spaces in a house: the hall, the parlour ...etcetera and this hierarchy had its origins in medieval times. We had abandoned this hierarchy now, which means we are the first generation to abandon housing culture.

Harris referred to the dissertation he had written at the AA in 1975. His dissertation had looked to identify carpentry procedures that were not the product of material/technical constraints but had been in (near) exclusive use for a long time. In this way he had identified what he called *the Grammar of English Building*, which he explained by means of four "rules".

Rule A concerned the tie beam lap dovetail joint. This detail was used in almost all buildings with tie beams and wall plates (except crucks) in England & Wales from C13 to C19, whereas in Germany and France they used the anchor beam.

Rule B was the bay system. This refers to the interaction between structure and plan – where cross frames supported and tied the structure, but at the same time they divided the plan. In Germany and France there was a different system.

Rule C was the direction of the upper face. The upper face of the internal cross frames faced into the middle/heated room. Although this systematic relationship between structure and plan was totally arbitrary Harris said it was ubiquitous in Europe and had even travelled to North America.

Rule D was converting trees into beams. Harris explained that the symmetry of beams in the tree was translated into “a congruent symmetry” in the building. The tree was “unfolded” into the building. Basically the carpenter converted trees into beams, beams into frames and frames into a hierarchy of spaces with social or cultural meaning; or the carpenter translated nature into culture.

Harris highlighted the regional distribution of timber construction with specific reference to the cruck frame and the aisled barn. He also talked briefly about the development of new timber frames today. He finished by talking about Gold medal architecture in the shape of the Downland Gridshell 2002, by Edward Cullinan, at the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum.

The next speaker was David Grech, an Architect and Historic Places Advisor for the East of England, from Historic England. His presentation was entitled: *Contemporary Architecture in a Vernacular Context*.

Grech began by talking about the vernacular context. He started by describing it as a rural or agrarian context and having a village setting. The vernacular context could be urban, however, and he referred to Cambridge, which he dubbed as ‘vernacular town and polite gown’ - with Kings College Chapel perhaps being the prime example of the latter. The context could also be industrial.

There has been a long established tradition of replicating vernacular cottages. Grech cited examples: the work of John Nash at Blaise Hamlet in 1812; the Arts and Crafts Movement; and the work of Ernest Grimson, at Stoneywell, in 1899. Despite this of tradition, replication made no contribution to the evolution of vernacular architecture.

He referred to the Vernacular Zone (Brunskill) and said that since all buildings today were professionally designed that meant none of them were vernacular. The important elements of vernacular buildings were identified as: the urban grain of the place; the siting of buildings in that place; the scale, form and massing of the buildings; the window to wall ratio; and the colour and texture of materials.

There had been post-war attempts to 'fit in' with vernacular contexts and some examples were cited: the work of Tayler and Green at Woodyard Square, Woodton, in 1951; and Aldington Craig and Collinge, at Bledlow, in 1975-77. Grech also referred to the English Heritage/CABE *Building in Context Toolkit* that sought to explain the criteria for a successful building project in an historic area.

Traditional buildings featured wide frontages and shallow plans, whereas modern buildings had deep plans, so the challenge was about resolving these conflicts. Grech discussed the work of Ash Sakula, at Tibby's Triangle, Southwold, from 2008. Grech believed that these projects added to the urban grain of the location and the architecture was influenced by vernacular styles but in a contemporary manner. One of the projects had involved the design of a new square.

The work of Adam Richards Architects, at Ditchling Museum, in 2013, was also cited. Here a new insertion had been constructed. It was very modern and in zinc, but it was based on a building in context. The insertion was carefully sited so that it was not too dominant.

Grech then referred to a talk he had given in 1985 called: in search of a new vernacular. Back then he had talked about shelter and how sense of place came from the geology and climate of an area. In the late 20th century it was as easy to transport materials as to source them locally.

Grech left the delegates with his thesis: that modern architecture should be sensitive to its context and conviction.

The next presentation was by Dr Maria Yioutani-Iacovides, a Conservation Architect with professional experience in Cyprus and the UK. She gave a short presentation on: *Earthen Architecture*.

The aim of her presentation was to look at the qualities and attributes of earthen architecture, the techniques in its construction and its use through the centuries. In the 20th century half the world's population lived in earthen buildings. In the 21st century there was growing interest in earth as an 'alternative' contemporary building material. The material was in widespread use in hot and dry climates. Yioutani-Iacovides described earth as a gift from nature.

The history of earthen architecture was discussed: starting with the story of the Neolithic settlement of Khirokitia, in Cyprus, which dated from 7000 BC; and then the Ziggurat of Ur, from ancient Mesopotamia (Iraq), from 4000-600 BC, to the Old walled city of Shibam, in Yemen, from the 16th century AD.

Earthen architecture was described as indigenous architecture: "Unbaked earth (was) a simple and obvious building material...and has produced an extraordinary range of architectural languages." (Dethier 1982:33) Its performance qualities and attributes were highlighted: it was economic and ecological; it had thermal mass; it provided sound insulation; and it was fireproof and possessed seismic attributes.

Earthen architecture had structural qualities too: it had equilibrium and cohesion. It ranged from simple single storey buildings to multi-storey construction, in Yemen for example. Yioutani-Iacovides explained the ancient and new construction techniques: cob (a structural component) and wattle and daub (infill); rammed earth, i.e. pisé de terre (monolithic construction); and adobe, i.e. mudbricks. She explained each technique by highlighting the basic traditional method and identifying examples of contemporary construction from the UK, France, the US and Australia). She was able to highlight some conservation issues and repair and restoration principles, before concluding with the question: down to Earth...is there a future? Since earthen architecture provides relief from the heat of the day and comfort during the cold night and it was sustainable: so Yioutani-Iacovides believed it did have a future.

The final presentation was by Clara Willett, from the Conservation & Research Team at Historic England. Her presentation focussed on *the Strategic Stone Study*. In her biography Willets had explained that she had been involved in this study for some time and that she had been involved in writing the revised Practical Building Conservation Handbook on Stone.

The Strategic Stone Study was aimed at improving our understanding of the indigenous stones in England, their occurrence and availability and their use in historic building. The problem was how to match stones, for sensitive repairs, extensions to listed buildings and new buildings in environmentally sensitive areas.

With repairs it was important to match the aesthetics, the mineral content and the durability of the stone. Consequently, the study sought to address the problems of identifying the stone type. Often the historic source was unknown and/or the historic source had gone since many original quarries had closed down. Often nothing similar was commercially available.

The Symonds Report (2004) *Planning for the Supply of Natural Building and Roofing Stone in England and Wales* recognised that there was no single source of information. As a result it had recommended: that Mineral Planning Authorities should identify and protect 'heritage quarries'; and a National database of building and roofing stones should be established.

The solution lay in using a combination of historic maps and records. Field work has to date identified: 12,759 building stone sources; 3,374 building stones; and 15,867 representative buildings and villages in 36 counties. The British Geological Society (BGS) had hosted GIS studies and data for each county was now available in Excel spreadsheets format: for each county, a 'Building Stone Atlas' pdf had been produced.

Links had been established with Mineral Planning Authorities with a view to reopening quarries. By linking the county spreadsheets to the National Heritage List the Building Stone Atlases could be used to ensure the correct stone was used when working on a listed building. This information was available from Historic England.

The Day Conference ended with a final question and answer session, chaired by Marion Barter. The discussion started by referring back to the opening presentation by Dr Marcel Vellinga and what we meant by vernacular.

It was suggested that, in new design, the only response left to climate change was an eco-build approach that addressed the issues of sustainability. There was only one direction: we had to be sensitive to the vernacular context, so the materials we used and the openings etc. on new work and new buildings were important. The sourcing of materials may not be local anymore, however, so would that be vernacular?

There was a question about urban form versus detailing: it was suggested that conservation was more about details. Detail was so important when these buildings were built: they were a form of *historic bling*. As a result the question was asked: do we need a modern interpretation of historic detail? The problem was that it was a difficult time, for detail.

It was admitted that bad pastiche did exist. One delegate cited the “2.4 m floor to ceiling building” as an example. Vernacular was about architecture of distinct places: it had to respond to context, it could not be a one-size-fits all. The Isle of Man solution was thought to be too prescriptive and it was not producing vernacular responses. The approach in the Isle of Skye raised questions about the siting of buildings in the landscape and whether they were more like works of sculpture. The Building in Context Toolkit had advocated respect for context, but it was suggested that we needed more flexibility. At that point it was suggested that we would not be able to conclude the debate on design that afternoon.

The topic of earth was raised and the question was asked: with climate change and warmer wetter winters and dryer summers, should we use earth in the UK? Dr Maria Yioutani-lacovides referred to the Grand Design TV programme which had included some examples. She said that in the UK cob was widespread in the south - where it had been used ‘forever’. She explained that we should use cob because it did work, but it did need protection from wet weather.

It was pointed out that in the Lime Forum there was growing interest in earth mortars. Stafford Holmes had been giving advice in India on earth buildings. There was a suggestion that whilst we could use earth-lime for buildings, there were healthier materials to use.

The discussion was then drawn to a close, the speakers were thanked and so was the IHBC NW Branch Events Committee that had organised the Day Conference.