

THE WORLD'S FIRST ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PEOPLE

One of the most important events in the history of recent research into the wider horizons of architecture is doubtless the publication of Paul Oliver's "Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World". The successful publication was celebrated at the RIBA-building, Portland Place, London, Dec. 4, 1997.

Paul Oliver's encyclopedia documents the results of an entirely new type of global architectural research which had developed over the last 2 -3 decades. Over 750 specialists from more than 80 countries contributed to it. Over approximately 2500 pages in 3 volumes it unites more than 1700 photographs and 1000 line drawings including plans, diagrams, orthographical and computer generated projections. In addition there are 80 regional maps.

The first volume is essentially theoretical, giving more than 100 approaches and concepts. Volumes 2 and 3 geographically document traditional architecture globally in 7 continental main areas and nearly 100 subzones. Doubtless this is the first time we get such a complete and dense information about how the non-urban surface of the earth is populated in regard to traditional housing. Thus, with its multilayered grid structure covering cultural, geographical, climatic and environmental aspects, this encyclopedia allows a highly complex and at the same time fairly complete image of a phenomenon greatly neglected by the disciplines of architecture as well as ethnology. This interdisciplinary "two in one" of 'vernacular architecture' and 'architectural ethnology' may explain the importance of this encyclopedia for architectural research.

In the framework of architecture Paul Oliver's encyclopedia opens the awareness, that the content of the term architecture had conventionally been extremely one sided, being restricted on aesthetically preselected samples of Euro-mediterranean (and other) historical, or 'high' architectures (key words: 'pyramids, temples, palaces and cathedrals') thus greatly neglecting a huge wealth of traditional architectural forms diffused over centuries all over the world. Evidently architectural 'theories' were greatly handicapped by this lack of knowledge and projected Euro-Western functionalistic rationalisms onto non EuroWestern cultures (architectural colonialism). This will change now. Architects of many regions of the world will become aware that there are many other ways to conceive architecture beyond EuroWestern rationalisms.

In view of the humanities and particularly in regard to ethnology, Paul Oliver's encyclopedia provides a full fledged 'dictionary of architectural ethnology' including agrarian house traditions

conventionally dealt with by folklore studies of various countries. The complexity of the presentation in this encyclopedia and, particularly the many approaches outlined in the first volume, may convince many an ethnologist, that the human dwelling may be a valuable and important source which expresses many aspects of human life.

With its additional comparative lexicon of 500 words (French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic), its glossary of over 1200 architectural and anthropological terms, and with its largest bibliography on the subject today, including over 9000 references, it may become a standard work for many interested in architectural research: architects, anthropologists, geographers, ethnologists, folklorists, planners, historians and conservationalists.

Remember the French 'encyclopedistes' (d'Alembert, Diderot, in collaboration with Rousseau, Voltaire, Grimm, Holbach etc.) and their impacts on what is called "enlightenment" in European thought? It may well be possible that Paul Oliver's encyclopedia will have impacts of 'enlightenment' on the present "postmedieval myth of the profaned creator genius" still violently virulent in post modern architecture. And, maybe he will be considered as the "architectural encyclopedist" by a new 'Neohumanism' in the architecture of the 21st century.

Paul Oliver (ed.)

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF THE WORLD

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