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Bernard L. Herman

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Bernard L. Herman

Interview by Gabrielle A. Berlinger

Introduction by Michael J. Chiarappa

Introduction

Bernard L. Herman is a founding member of the Vernacular Architecture Forum and a folklorist by training (Fig. 1). He has had a distinguished career at both the University of Delaware where he taught material culture studies, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he is George B. Tindall Professor of Southern Studies.

Upon completing his undergraduate career at the College of William and Mary, Herman moved on—inspired by the work of Henry Glassie—to pursue his PhD in Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania where he studied under Don Yoder. During this time, he took his place among a young cohort of folklorists who were intent on advancing the spirit of Glassie’s and Yoder’s vision for the study of American vernacular architecture. Herman wholeheartedly embraced the idea that the expressive depth of ordinary buildings held unparalleled potential for understanding the rich, yet complicated depth of the American experience. Central in this enterprise was the wider interdisciplinary scope of the North American material culture studies movement, and, being shaped in the crucible of this emergent paradigm, Herman was gripped by the possibilities of artifact-centred and artifact-driven interpretation.

With most of his research focusing on America’s 17th, 18th, and 19th-century built

environments, few folklorists have so seamlessly integrated social and cultural history, historical archaeology, and literary/critical theory into their work. Not unlike his colleagues Gerald Pocius, Thomas Carter, and Robert St. George, Herman’s debt to folklore’s artifact-centred/artifact-driven approach has been evident in all his work, particularly how buildings expand historical insight by being complexly rendered communicative, symbolic expressions. At the heart of this task has been the ethnographic nuance he has brought to his subject matter. Enumerating these expressive dynamics has been at the forefront of all of Herman’s most influential publications from *Architecture and Rural Life in Central Delaware* (1989) and *The Stolen House* (1992), to more recently *Town House* (2005) where he not only sees buildings as “signifiers that communicate the order (and conflict) of urban life” but also, given humanity’s subtle and overt dramas, as entry to the “social and symbolic sense of flow and texture of everyday city life” (2005: 2-3). Viewed in this vein, one can see the folkloristic arch extending from Dan Ben-Amos’ well-known definition of folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” to the discipline’s pioneering tether to performance theory to Herman’s assertion that buildings frame individual and community standards of comportment. If folklore study has been about oral and material expressions vital

to sustaining a community's deepest social and cultural values, and managing inherent tensions that inevitably arise, then Herman's handling of vernacular architecture through this prism squarely advances the enduring utility of this interpretive tradition for folklore and folklife studies.

GB: To begin, can you tell me a bit about your own entry into the field—you taught vernacular architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. Could you reflect a bit on those years and the early formation of the Vernacular Architecture Forum?

BH: Yes, I started teaching in the spring of '76. I can tell you that the origins for the Vernacular Architecture Forum began at one of the annual meetings for the Maryland Historic Trust. Orlando Ridout V, and others who were with the Trust, organized sessions around vernacular architecture and where those of us interested in the sorts of buildings that fell outside the pale of architectural history might be going. There were a number of folks there who were really engaged by the possibilities and who had been thinking that we needed some sort of structured forum. We were talking to each other a lot but there was really no armature for those conversations. Where they were occurring would have been within some sort of material culture context at the American Folklore Society, within the field of cultural geography, and to some extent among historical archaeologists. They were barely tolerated by the Society of Architectural

Historians. There also was some early interest in the American Studies Association. Overall, cultural geographers, notably Fred Kniffen (who worked with Henry Glassie early on) were the ones that developed the study of vernacular buildings, generally within the framework of diffusion and the historic movements of people over time that could be mapped by, among other things, housing, construction techniques, and functional building types. Historical archaeology was engaged in this work and that was largely led by the kinds of questions Jim Deetz was asking. There was also the work unfolding at St. Mary's City, Colonial Williamsburg, Old World Wisconsin, and Sturbridge Village. So, there were all these elements at play, but there was really just no organized conversation. Out of that meeting at the Maryland Trust, there was a kind of collective sense that we really need to get together as a group, separately. Catherine Bishir, I remember vividly, stood up and said we should meet again. And so, the first paper sessions and two-day field trip of what would become the VAF were organized.

That first meeting was held at George Washington University with John Vlach, St. Mary's City Commission, and the Maryland Historic Trust working together. We met in D.C. We had the first field trips then, I believe, on one bus. We went out to look at things both on the Chesapeake side and then we went out into the countryside of western Maryland, the area around Antietam and Frederick. Then, we had one full day of papers. That structure was there actually, right at the outset. In those first papers, as I recall, Bob St. George was one of the speakers, and I think I presented something. You can get a strong sense of that first meeting from the very first volume, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, which really was Camille Wells's vision. You know, we probably all talked about it but Camille said she was going to do a publication, and she did, and she deserves all the credit in that regard.

At that very first meeting, it became clear that what brought us together was a kind of engagement with architecture, object, and landscape. The collective interest in buildings tended to follow more of an historical arc with an emphasis on rural, folk, and old. In that sense, it looked a lot more like the Vernacular Architecture Group

Fig. 1
Bernard Herman (right)
with a local resident at
the 2003 Vernacular
Architecture Forum
Conference, St. Pierre-
et-Miquelon, France.
Photograph courtesy
Michael J. Chiarappa.



in the United Kingdom with its emphasis on buildings archaeology at that time, but our distinct intellectual threads were very clearly there, springing out of a fusion of folklore, historical archaeology, sociolinguistics, social history, and cultural geography. The leading lights for that early commitment to an interdisciplinary understanding of vernacular buildings included Henry Glassie, Dell Upton, Cary Carson, Abbott Lowell Cummings, and Catherine Bishir.

From the very outset, folks were interested in introducing to a large audience what they were seeing in the field. If you look back even further, the real driver for all of this would have come from a long tradition out of cultural geography and historical geography—this is Fred Kniffen and Henry Glassie's relationship there, and Henry bringing this all forward. It's coincident that Henry's *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (1968) comes out right around the time of the implementation of the big architectural surveys that had to go with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966, which created a National Register of Historic Places. The problem with the National Register was, nobody knew what to register other than what they already knew, so there was a mandate to get out in the countryside and compile the first architectural inventories. It was a golden age for architectural surveys. I was still an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary when I undertook my first survey. With a background in English literature and summer stints as an archaeological excavator, my knowledge of architectural history was virtually nonexistent. The other two folks, as I recall, hailed from the University of Virginia's historic preservation program. The kinds of buildings we were about to discover and document were not the stuff of mainstream architectural history. For our job, we had to have a camera, car, and curiosity. Our training was a day-long immersion by the folks at the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission—and we were off, equipped with survey forms, topographical maps, and film. Roughly eight or nine weeks later, we were back and describing these buildings that we were seeing and nobody had any idea were out there. It's hard to imagine now that fifty years ago people simply had no idea about the depth and breadth of what composed the architectural landscape.

GB: How did you learn your methods of documentation? Were you measuring and drawing at that point?

BH: We were asked to sketch plans. For me, the big moment—and I would say this was in 1974—was Dell Upton, who had studied with Jim Deetz and been working with Henry Glassie for a summer up at Plymouth Plantation. He was hired by the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. Ed Chappell was the historical archaeologist for the Commission, and I was a field surveyor. The three of us talked about a lot of things, but Dell was the one that really got me to start measuring buildings. Then when I went to graduate school in Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania, I was hired by John Milner Associates of the former firm National Heritage Associates, and I was working as a field historian and researcher with the staff architects. They taught me a ton about how to go about detailed documentation, but Dell is the one who really got us all to think about things at a much finer, more granular level. You just cannot underestimate or undervalue his contribution to the enterprise.

GB: The first VAF meeting was 40 years ago, in 1979. Out of that first meeting, how did distinct strands within the field take shape?

BH: Well, it was funny in that it was always personal. The Chesapeake folks were very, very tight. In fact, people used to refer to that group as the "Chesapeake Mafia," with good humour. Cary was the centre of gravity for that group—Cary and Barbara Carson, both. Cary, of course, because he had come out of St. Mary's City and then had moved to Colonial Williamsburg, so he had captured a greater array of possibilities around Chesapeake that brought together social history, historical archaeology and vernacular architecture studies. Then there are those of us who were less connected to the Chesapeake folks that shared different elements of what Cary pioneered. There were folks exploring the Delaware Valley and Pennsylvania back country, inspired by the example of Don Yoder. There was a cadre out of New England led by Abbott Lowell Cummings and Richard Candee. It was Catherine Bishir, Carl Lounsbury, John Larson, and other folks

from North Carolina. The VAF in its formative days offered a way for us to meet around shared interests and develop lifelong friendships.

Those early meetings opened up a universe of perspectives and methodologies. There was a lot of discussion around not only what we were seeing, but also about how to make sense of what we were seeing. Certainly, Cary led the way on that thinking in terms of economic and social histories of the Chesapeake. Dell brought to the enterprise a much deeper kind of theoretical and philosophical compass that was dealing with sociolinguistics and theoretical approaches to expressive culture. Bob St. George was right in there, early on, in the same vein. The folks coming out of New England often reflected the kind of thinking that Abbott Lowell Cummings brought—a kind of deeply informed architectural archaeology and antiquarianism, but I'm using "antiquarianism" here not as a negative, but as a kind of positive engagement with a particular kind of past. Abbott was also coming from the experience of historic house and museum interpretation. Cary was as well. There were all these threads, and what I think you get is a sense of the methodological and interpretive diversity of the enterprise, and the fact that the VAF brought folks together in a moment when there was a real need for critical and creative conversations that flowed out of the buildings themselves.

GB: How did this diversity of experience coalesce around a distinctive approach that defined the VAF?

BH: One of the things that vernacular architecture studies did, was that they began to ask different kinds of questions. We started out of the kinds of questions that Henry and Kniffen and others had posed—you know, what are we tracking on the landscape? And then a thunderbolt—two books that came out at roughly the same time: Henry's *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (1975) and Abbott Cummings' *Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay* (1979). They were both asking big questions about a host of cultural processes that folks who were working on buildings realized were broadly applicable to a far larger universe of objects. Those kinds of questions were really not being asked of other genres, for example gravestones or textiles.

Vernacular architecture studies were trying to grasp and define how and what objects mean to American material culture studies. The collective work of the VAF began to open up the larger field of material culture to different types of inquiry. It wasn't that people weren't looking at these things, it was how they were engaging objects. One of the great gifts that Henry made early on is that he presented the challenge with an audacious distinction and flair that only Henry can do. He talked poetically and by example about how objects do not express values and beliefs in the same way as words—that artifacts work in very different ways—and that was a huge gift for material culture, in general.

GB: Many founding scholars of the VAF, yourself included, were trained in folklore studies. How did folklore studies help shape the field of vernacular architecture studies?

BH: My sense is that where folklorists were coming from, out of the late sixties—I mean, there's a lot of other stuff going on in the late sixties—but people were really taking on the critique of hierarchical structures of power. You have to think about how the origins of vernacular architecture is very clearly a political moment. It comes up in a period where there is a greater commitment towards a diversity of voice, even though we were far from modelling diversity in terms of gender and race ... but the commitment was there. There was a commitment to the importance of history from "from the bottom up"—the phrase in those days—to recognizing and writing more diverse and inclusive histories. This was part Henry's great gift to the project—that those histories were not written in text but written in objects on the landscape. Cary, Abbott, Jim Deetz, and others coming from different disciplines were advancing the same cause. There was also a significant debt to early French rural and cultural history as well as anthropology—Marc Bloch, Ferdinand Braudell, and Lévi-Strauss, for example. Ultimately, others get brought in in terms of French cultural history, and you have the Annales School, and these things are all kicking in.

Folklorists at that time were, as they had been for a long time, looking at how genres move historically and geographically, and accordingly, at types and typology. Those are old legacies.

There was a lot of interest at the outset in how things moved historically and geographically. That has all evolved and matured. We now talk, for instance, more about flows than we do about diffusion. There were also key articles. J. T. Smith publishing in the U.K., undertook one of the first critical revisions of diffusion theory relative to vernacular architecture (1969), and that was coming out of a strong leftist politics at that time.

I think that vernacular architecture, which at that point was populated by a number of folklorists, clearly with Henry as an inspirational figure, was fueled by geography, genre, and, through Henry's interactions with Deetz, historical archaeology. I don't know that I ever saw folklore's engagement with vernacular architecture as a discrete field distinct or alienated from others. I just thought that folklore took on the topic as part of a much larger universe of expressive culture and in a particular historical moment where the vernacular was actually taking shape as an ideological position championed for a lot of other reasons. Folks tended to position vernacular architecture against architectural history. We were not interested, for example, in questions like, "What style is it?" There were also people in architectural history who would denigrate the study of ordinary buildings—my favourite being the phrase "shack-lore," which sort of tells you exactly where people stood at the time. "You're the shack-lore people!"

I think the conversation between folklore and vernacular architecture has actually become richer, more diverse, and more inclusive over time. We are looking at kinds of buildings that we would not have thought about early on. We were focused on 17th-century, 18th-century (early modern) and early 19th-century East Coast and South, and then boom! All of a sudden, you've got people like David Murphy from Nebraska talking about these amazing buildings on the Great Plains (1989) and you just went, "Whoa, what is this?" Or somebody begins to talk about jacals from South Texas and there is this sort of powerful realization about the depth and breadth of all these other traditions and the greater diversity of vernacular architecture.

GB: Focusing on your own relationship with the fields of folklore and vernacular architecture

studies, what brought you to these studies and can you share some of your core influences?

BH: I was not interested in learning a subject area or a topic. I didn't want to be an early Americanist. I didn't want to be somebody who worked on medieval history or the history of art in the Renaissance. I didn't want to be that person. I had an English literature degree, but I didn't want to become a literary scholar—or actually a scholar of any kind. What I wanted was to explore a field with as much creative and critical flexibility as possible. I wanted to go into a field which gave equal privilege to every possible critical array, and try to amass as much as possible—however imperfect that coming together may have been—all of those perspectives so that I could turn my attention to the things that really caught and fired my imagination. Among the very first things were buildings, but my interest in the objects and processes around them evolved over time.

I was extremely fortunate to know extraordinary folks over the years. I can't ever remember a conversation I had with Bob St. George that I didn't come away with a reading list. Or Dell. Dell opening us up to Basil Bernstein and *Class, Codes and Control* (1971) as a book that enabled a sociolinguistic analysis of buildings. That was pretty brilliant. Or, my mentors David Orr and Don Yoder with their generous sharing of insights from religious studies to classical archaeology. There were folks who were doing early quantitative analysis. And the folks coming out of historic preservation, who were certainly dealing at a very gritty level with this architecture, but often doing so in the arenas of environmental planning and policy. I mean, those were their own methodologies. So, it's all those influences and crosscurrents. What folklore gave me, though, was enough information to get in trouble on all kinds of interpretive fronts, and for that, I'm always glad I'm a folklorist. Folklore is one of those things that should come with a caution that says "Don't try this at home." It has served me well because within folklore there were fellow travellers, folks who were there for the quality of the question above the subject matter.

I came at all of this with the fundamental belief that I hold now, after all this time, in the poetics of everyday life. I see the things that people make and the things that people use as poetical, in a really profound way. Influences that really shaped me were things like Charles Olson's "Maximus" poems, the writing of Francis Ponge, the constructions of Joseph Cornell. These are things that I actually encountered long before I found folklore—or folklore found me—I can never quite figure this out. I always thought that folklore had the capacity to embrace the spirit and essence of art-making, and to think about the act of interpretation as a form of art-making or storytelling. This it is not dissimilar from poetry, or painting, or sculpture, or yard shows, or cooking, or gardens, or anything else.

GB: You mentioned once that in your study of folklore, you realized that the subject matter became the medium through which to ask questions that were important. Can you share a bit more about that realization?

BH: Yes, the one thing that makes folklore different is the number one skill that folklore should and does teach—listening. Folks early on began to "listen" to objects, and that's really a very different kind of skill set.

GB: Do you have any examples of how folks listened to objects that stand out in your mind?

BH: Well, for example, it's when folklorists began to engage archaeology. That's exactly what Henry demonstrates in *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*. What are the questions these objects ask of us? That's what folklore did and historical archaeology did. That is a great common ground between those two fields.

GB: In line with listening as a skill, how have you seen ethnography fit into the field?

BH: The reason we do this work is because, at the end of the day, what you really want to know about is people. How people create legacy and share their visions through what they make, and how they change it, and how they use it. This is where I think ethnography may be the wrong word—I think there's a humanistic dimension

to vernacular architecture studies—something along the lines of expressive ecologies. Ultimately, the buildings are all about how we seek to know and understand humanity—how we hear voice. Whose voices do we hear? It is a field that is driven by the presence of absence.

GB: Have you sought to work more with people in current relationship with their physical environments throughout your career?

BH: I've done work with quilt makers, the contemporary art of the African-American South, foodways, those sorts of traditions—so, yes, I've been moving more and more towards that kind of listening. But, you know, I can't look at a clam fritter sandwich on the Eastern Shore of Virginia without having all those lessons from vernacular architecture enter the equation. It's the questions posed by objects that led me into vernacular architecture as a field of study when I was doing one of those surveys in Virginia. It would have been November or December of 1973 and I'd been sent out to southwestern Virginia. Hell, I didn't even know Virginia had mountains at that point. I'm sitting on a ridge out there and I'm on a side of a ridge and it's a wonderful sunny winter afternoon, and I'm looking at this log house. It's like 60 feet long and I've been looking at buildings all over the county and I thought, "Damn, this all must mean something," but I had no apparatus to figure out what that might be. I was talking about this house with acquaintances I knew in the town where I was staying. They said well, "You have to read this book," and they lent me a copy of Henry's *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (1968). I took it back to where I was staying and I read the book and I'm like, "Yeah, this is the idea!" The big thing in that book, the big thing in all of Henry's work—more than anybody else—is that there's a fundamental poetical quality to all of it. Henry was all about bringing that kind of lyricism and grace to these objects and practices that too often were treated as museum specimens. He wrote in a poetical voice thoroughly grounded in intellectual rigour.

GB: Some feel that the fields of folklore and vernacular architecture studies, so deeply entwined in the VAF's founding, have drifted apart over

past decades. How do you understand the arc of their relationship today?

BH: Some may say, “Oh, the Golden Age is passed.” Not so. We haven’t even gotten there! There is no Golden Age to be lost. We haven’t found one. We may have become brittle around the embrace of conversation that launched us. Vernacular architecture as a field of study began as a continuing conversation built around sharing. I remember showing images of a building once, when I was still at the Landmarks Commission, and I had one of the architectural historians say, “Well, do you build these things in your basement?” That erupted into this debate over around what is it exactly that we are seeing and documenting? That’s a conversation. That’s the part that you want. The early VAF was about conversation. An important aspect of those changes were the bus tours. We’d go see cool stuff, but the most important thing was the time you got to spend talking with folks and sharing ideas and making connections. It was really a forum—a forum that adopted and adapted the idea of a moveable feast.

I think the question about the place of folklore in vernacular architecture studies is in material culture much more broadly. If there is a diminished connection that lack has everything to do with the kinds of questions we’re asking now. Our practice tends to be analogous to a kind of critical graffiti, where we have a theoretical position, or are making a particular argument. Material culture practice, because of the inherent “stillness” of objects, tends to be a descriptive process. Writing meaning on things rather than out of them. I think folklorists would do well to find their way back to the discovery of the humanity of things, and reach out interpretively from that awareness.

I think one question to ask in reply to yours is about the extent to which vernacular architecture studies have contributed to folklore and folklife, especially in terms of perspectives and methodologies. Early on, there was a lot of use of sociolinguistic frames. Henry was instrumental there. Dell Upton was really important in those ways. There was a compelling engagement with archaeology. I’m mindful now of how Jim Deetz and Henry Glassie worked together, or those of us like Dell [Upton] and Camille Wells,

Ed Chappell, Bob St. George, Myron Stachiw, Abbott Cummings, Ritchie Garrison, Cary and Barbara Carson—all those folks really engaged archaeological modes of thinking on two levels. There’s kind of a physical archaeology of building, the rigorous examination of a building around construction, plan development, ornament, sitting, etc. In essence, we are trying to understand what it is as an object located in time and place. The other thing was a notion of a contextual archaeology that comes out of a sense of the embeddedness of artifacts within time, space, and behaviour. I’m reflecting here on the work of Ian Hodder, in particular. What we’re looking for in buildings and landscapes are the relationships that are intrinsic to things, as Wendy Bellion notes, “in motion” (2011). Buildings inhabit place. They contain space in ways that can be read in terms of human behaviour and human understanding, which is at the centre of the archaeological enterprise.

For me, at the end of the day, vernacular architecture is really the study of presences. How were and are things present? What agency do they possess? The definition I use for aesthetics is a very simple one: the balance and proportion of being in the world. It’s how things present in the world, and that’s where folklore and phenomenology come together. I think that’s why vernacular architecture studies, in many ways, are the happy wedding of folklore and archaeology.

So then, the question becomes, what will vernacular architecture studies offer to folklore? I’m not sure that that question has been fully framed much less resolved, in part because folklore is always engaged with expressive behaviour—it’s always about embodied expression in some form or another. So how does the study and analysis of buildings and objects advance that pursuit in ways that do not relegate the object to the status of illustration or stage set? That, I think, is a question that folks are refining and exploring.

GB: What would you like to see for the future of vernacular architecture studies?

BH: I’d like to see folks being more adventurous. You know, you can be critically rigorous and creatively experimental at the same time. I’d like to see more folks across the disciplines ask big questions, but in ways unfettered by disciplinary

doctrine or theoretical manifesto. When you take those positions, though, you tend to edit out opportunities for discovery. I think if I wanted to see anything, I'd like to see us generously embrace the questions that flow from things that surprise the imagination.

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