

A Brief History of the Shotgun House

It is unquestionable that humans adapt to their environments and, provided sufficient time, inhabitants become experts in meeting their goals within their environment. These adaptations can be overlooked by outsiders, changed through culture contact, and/or forgotten. When cultural adaptations and traditions are applied in an environment, these can become part of the vernacular landscape. According to Henry Glassie (1965:2), "The objects that man has learned to make are traditionally termed material culture. Culture is intellectual, rational and abstract; it cannot be material, but material can be cultural and 'material culture' embraces those segments of human learning which provide a person with plans, methods, and reasons for producing things which can be seen and touched." Glassie (1968) and Deetz (1977) discussed the concept of a "mental template," and it was through this template that humans adapted and made lasting impressions upon the landscape. However, within a culture there is individual variation such as two individuals who speak the same language may use different dialects (Glassie 1968). Wells (1986:1) stated, "Approached as artifacts, the concrete results of architectural decisions made by common people in the course of ordinary lives, vernacular buildings have yielded new and sometimes startling insights into the cultures they represent." A vernacular approach views structures as artifacts that have established a lasting impression on the landscape.

Vernacular or folk architecture, although hard to define, is recognized easily. Fred Kniffen (1965:549) saw folk housing as a reflection of, "cultural heritage, current fashion, functional needs, and the positive and negative aspects of noncultural environment." James Deetz (1977:65) defined it as, "traditional and conservative; it exhibits great variation in space and relatively little change over time." Dell Upton (1983:263) understood the complexities of this term, "...I have always avoided defining this term. When pressed, my preference is to define vernacular architecture not as a category into which some buildings may be fit and others not, but as an approach..." From log houses to the gas station, the study of vernacular architecture covers a vast majority of buildings. According to Camille Wells (1986:3), "By now, it

is generally acceptable to define vernacular architecture as a common building of any sort.” Howard Marshall (1994:2) defines vernacular architecture as, “traditional architecture” and says, “It gives a visible face and functional core of local patterns, ethnic and regional character.” This obviously “fuzzy” concept of vernacular architecture can be traced to the works of Fred Kniffen (1936; 1963; 1965) and his students (Knipmeyer, 1956; Glassie, 1968; Wilson, 1975; 1982). Vernacular architecture originated as a concept of cultural geography and became a tool in studying material culture. More or less an approach to recording structures while noting their cultural influence. “Vernacular architecture” has been stretched – but not strained – to include the recording and analysis of structures of every age, form, and function” (Wells 1986:4).

The vernacular landscape of the “shotgun house” has evolved through time serving the needs of many, but is often associated with African Americans and “run-down” neighborhoods. The shotgun house is rich in culture and surrounded by debate. First recognized by Fred Kniffen (1936:186) and defined as, “a long narrow house... It is but one room in width and from one to three or more rooms deep, with forward-facing gable.” However, while the shotgun house evolved, the basic template largely has remained the same. Believed to be the product of amalgamation, the shotgun house has its roots in West Africa. The simple two-room houses of the Yoruba and Edo bare a similar resemblance to the shotgun houses of Haiti, both in size and dimension (Vlach, 1976). However, it would be in Haiti that it drew its influences from the Arawak Indian house and the creolization of the French while maintaining its African aspects before making its way to the United States. Dell Upton (1983:272), a pioneer of vernacular architecture, stated, “Vlach has been able to show that the shotgun house, now used by both blacks and whites, was formed in the West Indies from the conjunction of a Caribbean Indian and an African house type with a French structural system, all unified by African-derived proxemic or spatial values.” Maintaining its basic form, the shotgun house has been modified by American culture for economic reasons. The inexpensive cost to build as well as the versatility of fitting in small linear lots, the shotgun house has proven to be the home to many of the

working class across diverse urban landscapes, including, but not limited to, Louisiana, Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Missouri, and Texas (Kniffen, 1936; Wilson, 1975; Grider, 1975; Latham, 1977; Wilson, 1982; Marshall, 1994; Little, 1997). The template seemed to diffuse from New Orleans in all directions. Many landowners, home buyers, and renters have found their needs met by this simple structure.

Kniffen (1936) established the shotgun as a major folk house type for Louisiana. This was possibly the birth place of the shotgun house in the United States. Widespread research (Kniffen, 1936; Knipmeyer, 1956; Vlach, 1976; Stokes, 1957; Wilson, 1984; Edwards, 2009) has been conducted in this area pertaining to this house type. Shortly after being established as a type, questions of origin developed. William B. Knipmeyer, a student of Kniffen, believed the shotgun was related to camp houses (Oysterman and Trapper types) and evolved from the dwellings of Native Americans. According to Knipmeyer (1956:81), “the form, materials of construction, and facades and porches are like those of the camp.” He also thought it had a major influence on the bungalow, another forward-facing gable type. Knipmeyer (1956) also believed the shotgun was a product of the late 19th century due to the prices of lumber dropping. This idea was widely adopted by scholars studying shotguns in Louisiana for another decade or more (Vlach 1976). John Vlach would suggest the first shotgun of New Orleans was built in the early 19th century: “Architectural historians, while ignoring the rural versions of the type have shown that the shotgun became common in New Orleans well before the onset of the 1890’s lumbering boom” (Vlach 1976:49).

Henry Glassie (1968), like Kniffen, recognized the cultural significance of this folk house. However, it did not quite fit with his discussion of material culture. This is possibly because of its African roots and adaptation to Haiti before arriving in the American urban landscape. It was not originally part of Euro-American decent but fit quite well into the landscape. He noted that the template didn’t quite fit with the typical American folk house, because of the door located in the forward-facing gable. Glassie and Kniffen both considered the shotgun to have originated from Indian or Haitian slave dwellings. Regardless

of origin, they saw how well the type adapted to urban life and was ideal for company housing (Glassie 1968:218).

The majority of scholars (Deetz, 1977; Latham, 1977; Wilson, 1982; Upton, 1983; McRae, 2012) seem to give authority to Vlach's (1976) work pertaining to the shotgun. Vlach traces the cultural heritage of the shotgun back to West Africa. He states, "The links of to Africa are not simple and direct. The story behind the shotgun involves long migrations, the conduct of the Atlantic slave trade, the rise of free black communities, the development of vernacular (folk) and popular traditions in architecture, and the expansion of growth of American industrial needs" (1976:47). He believed New Orleans to be the center of development. This occurred due to the influx of free Haitians into the city around 1809, which created a need for housing. According to Vlach, "The newly enlarged black community apparently attained both economic success and social recognition. Free blacks were also active in the buildings trades" (1976:54). He not only understood the African influence on American culture, he sought it out.

Through fieldwork, Vlach (1976) was able to relate the Yoruba and Edo house form as a 10'x20', two-room building with the Haitian 10'X21', rural shotgun. He stated, "Vertical dimensions are also similar so that wall heights commonly range between six and eight feet in both Haitian and African houses" (1976:68). He compared the dimensions and "non-essential details" of the Haitian shotgun with the Louisiana shotgun and noticed a similarity, but also recognized these structures were based on other cultural templates.

Working to preserve shotgun houses in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina, Jay Edwards (2009) labels them, "The most contested house in America." He notes Wilson's (1984) "narrow lot theory" but suggests it, "is insufficient to account for the origins of the shotgun house in New Orleans" (2009:75). Although he believes Wilson's theory is "woefully incomplete", he suggests it could have been one reason for the choice of the shotgun house. Edwards (2009:75-76) argues to have a clear understanding, "we

must add other perspectives: social, economic, technological, and architectural.” In this way, we may be able to explain why the shotgun diffused to other areas and maintained popularity within the working class.

The majority of the working class in Mobile, Alabama lived in Creole Cottages until after the Civil War (Sledge 1990:57). Due to economic reasons and the ending of the Civil War (Gould 1988), an inexpensive structure was needed for this class. This coincides with the economic theory Edwards (2009:80) posited, “My tentative conclusion is that in these decades it was approximately twice as expensive to build a Creole cottage as it was to build a linear cottage of approximately the same floor space – for many, clearly a motivation for the selection of shotgun-type houses.” By the 20th century, the Creole Cottage largely was rejected by the working class for a more affordable structure, the shotgun house. By 1873, shotgun houses appear on Ehrgotte Kreb’s Bird’s Eye View of Mobile. These were located north and west of the downtown area (Sledge 1990). Similar to Grider (1975:47) in the boomtowns of Texas, an influx of tenement buildings was needed and met with the shotgun house. According to Sledge (1990:60), “The shotgun house has historically been associated with the white and black working classes, millworkers, and common laborers. This generally holds true for Mobile.” He notes a substantial concentration following the river south of Canal Street and north of the downtown area (Sledge 1990). Even Kniffen (1936) pointed out how the distribution of shotgun houses would follow major waterways in New Orleans.

Mobile’s shotgun houses evolved with time and the economy. Sledge (1990:61) states, “As bungalows sprouted on city streets, some shotgun house owners attempted to emulate the newer style by changing out their porch supports from turned posts to tapered box columns on brick plinths.” This change was prominent in the 1920s and 1930s, but the template remained the same. By the 1960s many of the shotgun houses, considered by some eyesores, were torn down during urban renewal (Sledge 1990:62). According to Sledge (1990:62), “Unfortunately the vast majority remain outside of the historic districts and are slowly deteriorating. Some have even been torn down by the city as suspected crack houses.” Despite

these actions by the city of Mobile, like New Orleans, shotgun houses played a major role in the urban landscape and investigation of this house type and surrounding landscape can reveal much about its inhabitants.

The shotgun house has evolved to fit the landscape overtime. While scholars are aware of its African roots and history, many people in Mobile and other cities where shotgun houses still stand are not. Though its origins are not agreed upon, John Vlach (1976) provided strong evidence to its genesis. Quite possibly the controversy started because of how adaptable the shotgun was and the amount of change it went through as it diffused from New Orleans. Not only was it viable for small, linear lots; it was able to fit both urban and rural landscapes. This allowed for its aesthetics to change while maintaining its African proxemics. Due to its affordability, many of its inhabitants were poor, working class. It is quite possible that some of the shotgun houses in Mobile were rentals, company housing, or owned by members of a lower socioeconomic status. Kniffen knew when he identified the shotgun as a folk house type, it would have many subtypes (1936). This accounts for the variety as well as the changing landscapes in which it was situated.

The shotgun house provides a close communal space, which is not customary for Euro-Americans. It provided a way to meet basic needs without overdoing it. James Deetz (1977:217-218) summed it up well when he wrote, "Wherever we find the shotgun house, its presence is clear evidence of the strength of the African tradition in African American material culture. In the absence of the constraints imposed under a system of slavery, this architectural expression was able to flourish, providing us with the clearest vision of the maintenance of an African architectural tradition in the New World." In a sense, this folk structure was a survivor and has been a part of the vernacular landscape for quite a while, adapting and evolving through time.