

CRITICAL REMARKS ON RURAL ARCHITECTURE AND TOWN PLANNING IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY: THE CASE OF NAVARRE, 1964-1994

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Oh villages which are gentrified, how ugly you become! Where is the history? Where the past? Where the poetry? Where the memories? For God's sake! Bomb the ancient buildings, don't restore them.

Victor Hugo, Travels in the Basque Country and Navarre

INTRODUCTION

We are grateful for the opportunity to present some work done by an interdisciplinary group attached to the magazine, *Texts de Critical Aesthetic*, at the University of the Basque Country. Our proposal has a double intention: to make public in an international forum some of the magnificent vernacular architecture of our country, and, at the same time, to denounce its progressive degradation during recent decades because of a worldwide effect. Vernacular architecture and town planning in the Basque Country for centuries have provoked the admiration of travelers and researchers; now they are about to disappear. The farm house or *baserri* (house in the woods) was and still is the heart of social and economic life in the Basque Country. It is also the anthropological and symbolic base of the culture. However, different processes, covering a wide range, have produced a complete transformation of vernacular and traditional culture. We will analyze some of these processes in this paper.

These processes are reflected in aesthetic changes in the farm house itself. These changes have transformed millennial architecture into a fake. This has also provoked a new building phenomenon that is known as the new vernacular style. The consequences for our architectural landscape have been catastrophic. The cessation of building traditional farm houses, the restoration of traditional farm

houses in a romantic fashion, massive building in the new vernacular or urban way—all of these have damaged profoundly and unnecessarily the ethnic identity of the Basque culture without offering anything valuable in exchange. The result is a cultural uniformity along with bad side effects.

Cultural change in the rural world in European countries has progressed at a slow or at most a moderate pace. But it was quick and radical in the Basque Country; it took only a couple of decades. Now only about 75% of genuine vernacular architecture remains. The analysis of our case can be seen as an example for the so called underdeveloped countries. It can also provide a general framework to show the necessity of a sensitive and respectful planning for future dwellings in rural environments. It could be advantageous to architects, town planners, anthropologists, and even politicians.

Our proposal is interdisciplinary. Both artists and philosophers have worked with us, and our approach is deliberately philosophical and aesthetic. It can not be any other way. It is necessary to explore the primary causes of the cultural and aesthetic changes to understand correctly the architectural changes. We can not avoid using conceptual tools taken from philosophical, artistic, and literary sources if we are to display all the visual values found in our fieldwork.

Not only our approach but the character of our research leads us to take a critical approach to the problems we consider. This attitude, always seen by our group in a positive spirit, forces us to add some concrete proposals based on our experience. We consider them realistic and feasible in spite of the unlikelihood of their use by state bodies.

This paper is based to an extent on the works that Xabier Morrás has been doing during the last decade. He has dealt with changes in vernacular architecture in the province of Navarre—a Basque area even though, administratively, it does not belong to the Basque Country. Morrás's pioneering research can be appreciated for its content and approach, and it has inspired our critical remarks and opened a new perspective on these kinds of works. We have to acknowledge other authors—Geertz, Illich, Alexander, Oliver, among others—who in our opinion have revitalized the methods of the humanities and social sciences; they too have influenced our study. Also there is a large although more distantly related list of thinkers and artists we have to mention: for example, Heidegger,

Rilke, Simmel, Tanazaki, and Agee. We would also like to mention in a special way Jorge Oteiza, who widened our focus and sensitiveness to the beauty of what we call vernacular art. However, the attitudes that can be seen to greatest effect in Morrás's work are the basis for our research. Without these references, our work would not be intelligible; neither where we started nor our aims would be clear.

STEPS AND PROCESSES

The architectural changes we are concerned with began at the beginning of this century, but in Navarre they made the most headway in the sixties and seventies. Prefabricated materials, like glass, forged iron, or concrete, were introduced conservatively in vernacular architecture, only for parts of the house or in specific buildings. These kept intact the vernacular harmony of villages as a whole. Government regulations dealing with hygienic systems, in houses or barns, sometimes forced alterations in the original colors and textures of façades, which were most often made of stone, bricks, or adobe. They were whitewashed, completely or partially, for effect. Nevertheless, after 1964, this slow and moderate architectural transformation suffered a drastic and excessive speed-up, affecting all rural buildings. In that year, a campaign was started to modify aesthetic properties of rural buildings. This altered the physiognomy of vernacular architecture in Navarre so profoundly that it became almost unrecognizable. This campaign lasted until 1982. It was a complete transformation of all the parts of each dwelling. The outer parts were transformed, mainly according to function, individual taste, or for supposed aesthetic improvements. The government provided economic subsidies. This was the reason for whitewashing, painting, or covering external walls with plaster of Paris. Also this is the reason for emphasizing the blocks of stone around windows. Main doors, frequently ancient, were replaced with different shapes. Artisan tiles were replaced by prefabricated ones. New concrete chimneys were erected. Magnificent eaves were shortened. Entry and vestibule pavings were removed. Skirting boards made of stone were left visible. Woodwork was painted in loud acrylic colors. Chariot wheels and flowerpots were used as ornaments. Outbuildings suffered transformations, or new ones were made of thick bricks. Other little changes succeeded in hiding all the vernacular appearance of farm houses. Those changes transformed the *baserris* into neo-vernacular or urban buildings.

The main aim of this campaign, promoted by Franco's bureaucracy during the period of economic development in the sixties, was to transform picturesque zones into tourist attractions. Another reason was to provide a positive image of Franco's regime. First, he wanted to appear as a strong economic leader for post Civil War Spain. Second, he wanted to be seen as the politician who raised the income of Spanish peasants, who had always been considered extremely poor. These real reasons were disguised by the ambiguous general guidelines provided by UNESCO. In order to hit this double target, it was necessary to destroy or disguise all that could be associated with poverty or underdevelopment. In the perverted mind of Franco's bureaucrats, the vernacular culture itself represented that poverty.

The prestigious tourist model provided by the bourgeois villas of the French Coast became the yardstick. This architectural model had showed up during the twenties. In this model of new vernacular farm houses, only some features of local architecture remained—and only externally. For example, the model had two steeply inclined roofs, whitewashed façades, wood frameworks, triangular vanes of pigeon lofts, etc. They only resembled the Basque farm house of a few zones and valleys. The material richness, stylistic features, ornamentation, and building solutions of the many different Basque farm houses were artificially and falsely simplified into a single-pattern paradigm of picturesqueness. The Basque vernacular culture was simplified and made false to the extreme of caricature. Surprisingly, this imaginary pattern, inspired by the nostalgic revivalism of the "ornate" cottage, was transformed into one of the basic symbolic reference points for Basque nationalism. Paradoxically, this new nationalist separatist symbolism had been promoted by a certain type of Francoist ideology based on peculiarities of the Navarre law code. However, without a doubt it has a Spanish origin; perhaps it could have been inspired by the popular rural success of the Nazi German new vernacular model.

The most frightening episode in this campaign was not the partial restoration of the characteristic north and central farm houses. Worse were the massive destructions and alterations in the south of Navarre. In Franco's mind, it was clear that foreign visitors should not be allowed to see adobe or clay walls, which had been characteristic of the flat, non-stony region in the south of Navarre. For him this was a clear sign of dirtiness, of the precarious life typical of Africa. Therefore he ordered a thick whitewashing of all external walls.

In addition, romantic travelers, who were attracted to the secretive Spain, were not allowed under any conditions to photograph the excavated caves in soft clay where large populations still lived. Franco forced the expulsion of these modern troglodytes, closing their caves, or simply dynamiting their dwellings. Their inhabitants were resettled in new quarters, modest uniform houses designed by urban architects. Those dwellings were similar to those of the New Village era: planned buildings inhabited by heterogeneous populations of immigrants, resembling the rural villages created by Italian Fascism.

The extent and degree of these changes were important thanks to the power of economic aid for third parties. These in turn provoked a domino effect: envious neighbors kept carrying out more and more expensive changes. The most alarming fact is that a new vernacular style was consolidated, considered perfect, and became famous. It would be used as a model for future restorations or for constructing new buildings. That first stage of architectural change succeeded completely. The minister of tourism congratulated his fellow bureaucrats, and the dictator himself interviewed successful planners.

When this campaign ended, economic aid went on under the purview of the regional department of culture in an effort to continue successfully with the patterns, styles, and targets of Franco's policy. Eventually, the process worked on its own and did not need any particular stimuli.

The rise in the standard of living during the later democratic era, from the campaign's end until now, has accomplished so much that thanks to the restorations and planning carried out there are now no unaltered villages. There is one slight difference, in the form of restoring the whitewashed walls. The layer of plaster on the wall has been reduced to highlight the stones, which are bordered with grey concrete filament.

This new fashion is not really new and was used in the fortress style restorations of the National Tourism Hotel Network. This network caused the transformation of ancient castles and palaces into hotels, something that also belonged to Franco's ideology. It was a clear reference to the military character of the national crusade of the Castillian Reconquest, which Franco considered the essence of Spanish culture.

The new political times, targeting urban comfort and the display of wealth, have provoked new damage in the remaining untouched vernacular inheritance. Asphalt and concrete have been used on streets, burying the ancient paving. Unnecessary sidewalks, block walls, modernist or functional street lamps, squares and postmodern gardens all have appeared. The typical Basque pelota courts have been painted or covered. And barns have been built with concrete and corrugated iron sheets. These changes have altered the vernacular environment through the use of urban styles and materials.

Briefly, the countryside is now a planned town and this allows the introduction of new buildings, completely alien to the vernacular culture. The consequences are unavoidable and can be noticed in many zones. This is the process: first, ancient farm houses are abandoned or demolished; then the new peasants erect postmodern farm houses in the surrounding areas; and, finally, urban dwelling blocks of diverse heights, coupled with chalet groups of heterogeneous styles, appear. We have to add a miscellaneous collection of architectural freaks, like factories, gas stations covered with iron sheeting, weird night clubs, roadside bars, iron bridges, golf courses, and modern highways.

All of these alter either the center of the villages or the beautiful surroundings, formerly composed of dense woods, fields of crops, and prairies. The traditional harmony is lost. What happened over time with the Clive Aslet field in England has just happened quickly and suddenly in our region. This threatens us with the possibility of "ruruban zones"—a neologism coined by French sociologists to name the modern habitat, an unbroken gradation from town to countryside. The transformational cycle of architecture and town planning in our region has ended with this sad situation: what began as a tourist propaganda campaign in Franco's era, culminating during democratic times, has quickly converted itself into a systematic and enthusiastic killing of vernacular culture. Sociologists and architects think that the change was inevitable, and is, overall, positive. They identify the change with an increase in socio-economic and educational status, as well as an education of rural folk. It appears as a new material culture based on objects: cars, trucks, harvesters—among them, the TV set as the central icon of the new dwelling.

Supposedly, all of this represents wealth. But the sociologists do not provide any evidence, nor highlight the subsequent problems. However, a

detailed and aesthetic analysis reveals that the particular features of the new or restored dwellings cause internal conflict due to a sundering of the original traditional culture. And these new objects of material culture demonstrate that all too clearly.

At the bottom of this process of cultural change appears a difficult and very real problem of definition. We did a series of interviews, and all of this showed up clearly. The subtle influences beginning with the official dictatorial institutions of Francoism introduced a feeling of shame and disregard with respect to Basque culture and ethnic identity. Traditional peasants used to be considered inferior human beings. They were considered dirty, ignorant, and underdeveloped; their dwellings were inadequate, anti-aesthetic shelters, dwellings better for beasts than for men. It was necessary to save peasants by transforming them from their original status into good, civilized, urbanized peasants. In order to do that, a basic requirement was to sacrifice their vernacular culture, and, above all, to create a new proper place of abode. This was meant to transform their old barbarism into a new-found modernity. The rich, intense, sensorial, and visual universe of vernacular farm houses should be cleaned up, whitewashed. All the awful objects in their houses, made by craftsmen, should be replaced by industrialized, technological objects. The authorities forced the peasants to change their tools, duties, costumes, clothes, furniture, and finally their dwellings which they identified with, in order to change their whole life and mind. There was no progressive change, slowly assimilating to the modern world. There was no opportunity to get a beneficial coexistence of values and material culture. They could not live a restored vernacular life through new technology and artifacts, as happened in other countries. In the Basque case, we dare to say that the change has followed the same process that has happened in "underdeveloped" countries; a cultural jump without any evolution, causing at once a terrific uprooting, from forest shacks to apartments blocks. In this sense, the uniqueness of Basque culture in the European environment—thanks to its isolated cultural and linguistic ethnicity—has been menaced by two dominating states, France and Spain. This has meant that the Basque Country has suffered twice the uprooting in the name of that universal cultural change.

The most tragic thing is that this massive transformation of an original culture has been accelerated by the Basques themselves while trying to resist the disappearance of their culture at the hands of France and Spain. The same thing

that happened with the unification of Basque dialects in a standard language—the *euskera batua*—happened also with the unification of Basque vernacular architecture. It was transformed into a unique idyllic model of urbanized, folkloric farm houses. These complex and struggle-dominated cultural processes first appeared during the dictatorship, then progressed in the democratic stage. Finally they have been absorbed within the general trend of a town planning for the countryside. Architects and town planners, educated either in the shameful rural culture or in a modern rationalism, have looked down on the vernacular. Vernacular wisdom for humanized town planning and vernacular architecture have not appealed to them at all. Instead, they have promoted the destruction or the falsification of their vernacular inheritance, with no institutional restraint. This has led to aesthetic freaks, impossible to acknowledge within a so-called civilized country.

Meanwhile the disaster continues. That hidden drama, pointed out by us, appears again and again. The phenomenon of a second house for holidays in the village of origin, together with garden dwellings close to town, show us the ongoing exodus from towns to countryside. Our villages are abandoned during the winter, inhabited only by elderly people, but during holidays they are full of nostalgic tourists and immigrants. Non-productive (by ECC standards) cattle farm houses, emptied now by the emigration of young people, are transformed into cosy little hotels. A recent rural-tourism program has promoted exactly this.

There are no longer craftsmen able to restore properly vernacular buildings; ancient farm houses are left to ruin or are demolished by secret negotiations. Hundreds of thousands of cattle barns and other rural buildings lie in ruins on mountainsides—symbols of our doomed landscape and economy. Autochthonous woods are either cut down or allowed to run wild.

Meanwhile, ethnic museums of the recent past, covering only a couple of decades, are created in restored farm houses. Mixed in their collections are chests, yokes, photographs—all symbols of a world, yearned for secretly but forbidden by civilization. In this change—or, better, in this cultural leap—from traditional farm house to new vernacular chalet, the most terrible aspect is the newly acquired aesthetic. The systematic destruction of vernacular architecture by someone like Ceausescu in Romania, could not have been worse. The admixture of a new vernacular folklore, along with a brutalist postmodern and

modern rationalistic architecture which reigns out of control in our villages, can hardly make up for the lost vernacular style—even if that would be uncomfortable and impracticable nowadays. It is clear that, up to a certain point, the uprooting of rural youth, and the acute problem of nationalistic violence that we suffer, is caused by this radical and unstoppable loss of cultural identity. This chaotic and confused transformation of vernacular architecture and town planning, along with the humiliation of the people and their language, in deference to French and Spanish, has manifested itself in the violence that we suffer today. Traditional farm houses, as a symbol and center of Basque culture, deserve a better end, even in our changing times.

CONCLUSION

Although similar to other European zones, the experience of the Basque case displays special features useful for "underdeveloped countries." In this sense, it is evident that the destruction of any vernacular culture always starts as an attack on or a substitution for its mentality (language) and its material culture (architecture). The Basque Country had miraculously been able to preserve its autochthonous language, tough as it was by usual standards. Similarly, if a particular ethnic group does not have its own material culture to express, then it will lose an important part of its meaning. The autochthonous Basque language, which had no written texts up to the fifteenth century and was not taught until the end of the twentieth century, has survived in a cultural bubble without adapting to the modern world. Now, in an effort to adapt it through a drastic and depersonalizing standardization based on Spanish language patterns, the Basque language has lost its ethnic identity which relies on a material culture.

For this reason, the destruction or falsification of vernacular architecture in the end means a loss of identity. This is because this cultural synthesis articulated its life and everyday essence. The tragedy of the Basque Country, from this perspective, does not depend on political recognition; it depends on a type of cultural preservation which is independent of and prior to its autochthonous language. What is required is the preservation of its vernacular architecture, its cultural objects, and its customs. Franco, grim enemy of the Basque culture because of his conception of the state, and Basque nationalism as an enemy of Francoism, joined together to destroy every trace of the vernacular Basque culture—especially its architecture (though for different reasons). Thanks

to that unnatural alliance, which was reinforced by "technological progress" and architectural rationalism, the survival of an entire millennial ethnic group has been seriously endangered, with very few possibilities of surviving. In so little space of time, it has been impossible to preserve the traditional vernacular farm house as material testimony to be absorbed by modern language and culture. Now, without architecture, customs, or identity, our ancient language might only serve as a sad and artificial Esperanto, reflecting things that other cultures express better. We cannot forecast the future of the Basque culture. We can not know if its destiny is an agonizing end or a flourishing revival. However, we are sure that the loss of its vernacular architecture implies the destruction of its central base. Whether Basque culture is able to maintain itself—thanks to new standardized language, folkloric costumes, a new system of national symbols, along with autonomous institutions, is something that only futurology or blind hope can tell. The only thing we will say here is that the break with its cultural vernacular history will affect decisively its evolution in the short term, for bad or for good.

To avoid the danger of extinction or assimilation within other cultures, third world cultures and the cultures emerging from the disappearing Communist empire must face a crucial question, that of vernacular architecture and town planning. If our conception of the world respects other cultures, we should rethink our current policy on these subjects.

We are convinced that our proposals—at least in general—have the virtue of being at least as suitable as current policy (even in terms of restoring Basque institutions). So we have formulated four necessary programmatic points.

1. Governmental bodies must encourage broad and deep studies of vernacular architecture for particular regions, including studies of how to preserve them or transform them in acceptable ways.
2. Such studies should provide criteria for strict laws on (a) how to preserve the heritage that remains, including careful and sensitive restorations, but also on (b) how to correct inappropriately restored cases.
3. Legislation requiring an aesthetic approach to architecture and town planning should be implemented, requiring features such as (a) genuine respect for vernacular architecture and the natural environment of authentic dwelling

centers, and (b) institutional guidelines with respect to such external features as materials, heights of structures, and so on (where the originals no longer stand). This sort of legislation should forbid the new vernacular styles and favor such genuine styles as still exist.

4. There must be developed a set of complementary activities of a cultural type, such as (a) the promotion of an ethnographic museum network in each valley or zone, to include past testimonies and objects, together with historical monographic and popular publications, and (b) the promotion of education at all levels, from childhood to university, about different aspects and values of vernacular culture (history, economy, society, language, art, architecture, etc.). These proposals, if advanced with sensitivity and imagination, should be in the hands of advisory committees that should be made up of expert anthropologists, architects, and rural artisans. They could preserve at least some of the beautiful vernacular creativity of each culture as a testament for our short term technological future. Even more important, this policy should preserve and offer this inheritance to humanity, taking into consideration the nature of contemporary humankind, as the poet R. M. Rilke reminds us in his famous elegies.

Our team, deeply affected both emotionally and intellectually by our intimate experience of the Basque Country, is acutely aware of the improbability that our proposals will ever be carried out. But we are equally aware how urgent and beneficial the effects would be if they were.

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