

"MY GIRL verna"

Bermudian Vernacular Architecture in the 21st Century

by James Tucker

There are two contradictory currents within Bermudian vernacular architecture today. One is the original building tradition of the 17th century, and the other is "21st-century Bermudian Vernacular."

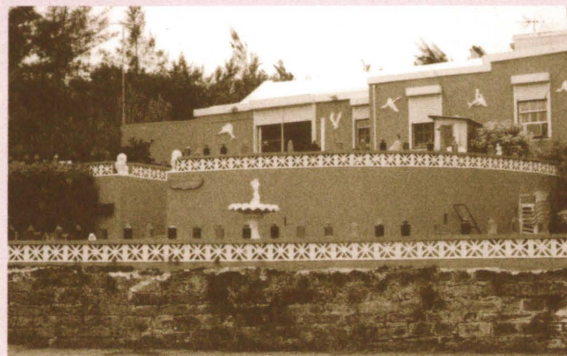


Vernacular architecture is defined as the building tradition of a local people. It is a pattern language or dialect of construction that is particular to a group of people.

The earlier form of Bermudian construction can be described as simple, quiet, and understandable. Consisting of timeless forms, it is clearly defined and beautiful in its "fit for purpose."

The 21st-century vernacular, however, seems to present a dynamic, unpredictable landscape. Today's buildings appear as a chaotic clash of form, color, and style. Architectural elements are interpreted and executed by the builder in a naïve style. The decoration is often based on memory and individual caprice, not on scaled architectural plans.

This is the paradox: How can both of these worlds have been drawn into the gravitational orbit of Bermudian vernacular architecture? Part of the answer is really quite simple: The practitioners have changed. The earlier architecture was built by English colonists adapting their building knowledge to the climate and materials of their new home. The 21st-century vernacular is a building style born out of a multicultural hodgepodge. As a people we combine many cultural influences, which still somehow make us uniquely Bermudian.



Above, left: Archetypal Bermudian vernacular consists of simple, quiet, understandable, and timeless forms from a previous idealized life. Photo courtesy the Bermuda Government

Above: These bottles, while not strictly architecture, nonetheless represent the spirit of what is 21st-century vernacular and represent Bermudians' need to celebrate the everyday.

Photo by Kristen Fernekes, © Smithsonian Institution

As one people we need to accept each other's stylistic ways of "celebrating" shelter, both when we share values in particular architectural forms and when we don't. We need to be able to accept — if not entirely understand — each other's styles to come together as one society.

We can start by being less critical of our built environment; such criticism is only divisive. We can stop trying to "interpret" all of what we see and try to be less "educated" in our judgments. We should recognize that putting up a building is art — only keeping it from falling down is science.

James Tucker is a Bermudian architect and building arts researcher who is currently working on a book about 21st-century Bermudian vernacular architecture.

Because "Black" Bermudians could not play cricket in the games sponsored by the British clubs, friendly societies and lodges run by Bermudians of African descent created and sponsored the Somerset and St. George's cricket teams. The teams eventually generated their own social clubs that remain active today, when Cup Match brings all Bermudians together. Cup Match regalia and dress are art forms in their own right, and the verbal art of Cup Match commentary is a relished performance. Today, Cup Match is still much more than a sporting event — it is an occasion for Bermudian artistry and performance.

Easter is another occasion for family and community celebration all over the island. On Good Friday,

Bermudians fly kites, play marbles, and eat traditional foods such as hot cross buns with codfish cakes. Gombey (costumed dancers) appear in the streets and at the doorsteps of friendly families. Members of church congregations across the islands dress their churches with devotional offerings of lilies and other fresh flowers from their home gardens for Easter Sunday, and island families place new flowers in the pots and urns at the gravesites of cherished relatives. Such Bermudian traditions reflect shared values.

Nowadays most building in Bermuda is done entirely by hired contractors; however, Delaey Robinson recalls that in his childhood "when building went on...you might