

# VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE in the PRE-COLUMBIAN AMERICAS

Edited by  
Christina T. Halperin  
and Lauren E. Schwartz

ROUTLEDGE ARCHAEOLOGY  
OF THE ANCIENT AMERICAS



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**ROUTLEDGE ARCHAEOLOGY**  
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*Vernacular Architecture in the Pre-Columbian Americas* reveals the dynamism of the ancient past, where social relations and long-term history were created posthole by posthole, brick by brick. This collection shifts attention away from the elite and monumental architectural traditions of the region to instead investigate the creativity, subtlety and variability of common architecture and the people who built and dwelled within it. At the heart of this study of vernacular architecture is an emphasis on ordinary people and their built environments, and how these everyday spaces were pivotal in the making and meaning of social and cultural dynamics.

Providing a deeper and more nuanced temporal perspective of common buildings in the Americas, the editors have deftly framed a study that highlights sociocultural diversity while at the same time facilitating broader comparative conversations around the theme of vernacular architecture. With diverse case studies covering a broad range of periods and regions, *Vernacular Architecture in the Pre-Columbian Americas* is an important addition to the growing body of scholarship on the indigenous architecture of the Americas and is a key contribution to our archaeological understandings of past built environments.

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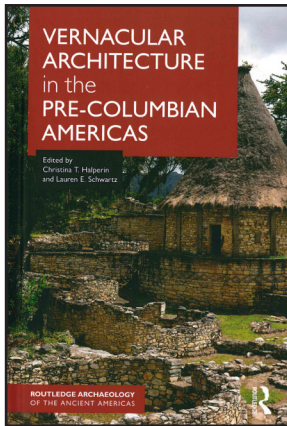
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## Vernacular Architecture in the Pre-Columbian Americas

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*Reviewed by Cameron H. Lacquement, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama.*

*Vernacular Architecture in the Pre-Columbian Americas* by Christina T. Halperin and Lauren E. Schwartz is an edited volume, the chapters of which address common, non-monu-

mental structures in regions of North and South America before European contact. The intention of the authors is not to provide the reader with a comprehensive overview of vernacular architecture throughout the New World—an undertaking that would be fairly daunting. Chapters instead focus on the architecture of the common or ordinary people in a specific region and period. In doing so, various authors examine the people involved in the construction process, and a range of associated behaviors including the builders' decisions to create and modify architectural forms, the expression of social identity, and the embodiment of traditions and ideologies.

The chapters are grouped into 3 sections: 1) Building buildings, 2) Structuring structures, and 3) Temporality of variation in architecture. Chapters in the first section focus on patterns in building form, construction techniques, and material expression. Jerry D. Moore (Ch. 2) examines decision-making, building transformation, and salvage patterns of tabique architecture in the Tumbes region of northern Peru. After tracing the history of construction types in the region, he makes an ethnoarchaeological comparison between structures at the late prehistoric village of Loma Saavedra and modern-day tabique architecture. Anna Guengerich (Ch. 3) surveys circular stone houses at Monte Viudo, a mountain-top village in the Chachapoyas region of Peru occupied between 1250–1450 CE. Expanding on the theme of building buildings, she documents the basic template for domestic houses while exploring areas of possible flexibility in the design and construction process. Schwartz (Ch. 4) explores architectural designs and arrangements in the Naco Valley, Honduras during the Late and Terminal Classic periods (600–1100 CE). Using a three-tiered index (characteristics, arrangements, and form) she examines house variation based on cobble platform configuration and investigates the breath of construction techniques and material preferences underlying the architecture forms.

The second section, Structuring structures, includes chapters that demonstrate how shared architectural practices both reflect and direct social identity, cultural values, and shared experiences. Donna Nash (Ch. 5) discusses variation within and between patio groups at two sites in the Wari Empire (600-1000 CE) in the Moquegua Valley, Peru. Based on the design of patio structures and the appearance of canonical Wari architecture in the valley, she suggests that the inhabitants of Cerro Mejía and Cerro Baúl sites were pressured

by the expanding Wari, which manifested in competing architectural styles. Halperin (Ch. 6) examines circular shrines, apsidal structures, and sweatbaths in the Guatemala Maya lowlands during the Terminal Classic period (800–950 CE). Based on evidence from Tayasal in the Peten region, she argues that architectural forms constructed by commoners was not simply imitation of elite, but instead a translation—a reciprocal relationship where even the simplest structures both inform and are informed by their elite counterparts.

The final section, *Temporality of variation in architecture*, includes chapters that illustrate change in the material and cultural practices of house construction and use over time. Susan Alt (Ch. 7) establishes a relationship between religion and architecture in the Mississippian world using evidence from the Emerald site in the American Bottom. Focusing on the appearance of shrines after the urbanization at the site, she examines the role shrines played in the development of a newly forming religious landscape and how the meanings associated with architecture may change even while its form persists. Kristin De Lucia (Ch. 8) studies Early Postclassic (900–1250 CE) domestic structures at Xaltocan, Mexico and their role in crafting the social landscape. Based on her analysis, she views houses as spaces that transmitted a framework for social relations from generation to generation and required maintenance to preserve connections to tradition in a rapidly changing world. Kellam Throgmorton (Ch. 9) examines variation and social differences in domestic (small house) architecture of the Ancient Pueblo during the Chacoan period (850–1140 AD). Architecture diversity is viewed as a result of social and historical distinctions of different groups while attempting to maintain a connection to monumental (large house) structures. Large house architecture became less diverse through time, while small house forms do not conform as readily, which Throgmorton associates to cultural and geographical differences and builders' decisions regarding labor investment. The concluding chapter (Ch. 10) by Julia A. Hendon discusses the importance of each chapter, while also emphasizing the volume's place in the current body of research.

The book is an excellent resource for archaeologists interested in the study of prehistoric vernacular architecture in North and South America. It offers an assessment of prehistoric construction techniques and the meaning of architectural forms before cultures were disrupted by European dominance. The chapters compiled in the volume do have a precise topical focus (non-monumental, ordinary house structures) and a consistent temporal scope (late prehistoric), but a less definite, slightly sporadic regional clustering. One might expect chapters that address structures made of stone, erected on cobble platforms, or employ decorations such as friezes and mesadas would not be useful for archaeological endeavors in the mid-continental U.S. which lacks these architectural features. However, by taking an agent-centered approach to address social motivations and traditions in architectural form, authors concentrate on the study between architecture and consciousness, the importance of materiality in constructing the built environment, and architecture as a semiotic indexes that display and record social information through time. Accompanied by a number of methodological

## *Book Review*

perspectives for examining vernacular architecture, including ethnoarchaeological comparison, methodologies in form and spatial arrangement, and statistical analysis, archaeologists researching different architectural forms or working in different regions should be able to appreciate the different theoretical and methodological perspectives and apply them to their own research.