

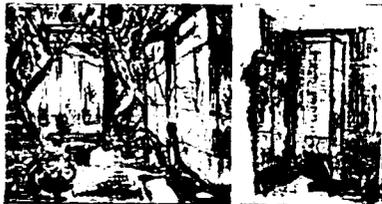
The Collector of Images: Bernard Rudofsky's Interpretation of Modernism Through the Vernacular

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The earth is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are authors.

George Perec, "The World",
Species of Spaces, Paris 1973-74



Bernard Rudofsky (1905-1988) was an important figure, who influenced the development of Modern architecture in Europe and America, in particular linking new ideas about modern space to the study of vernacular architecture. His approach was informed by his vast knowledge of architecture, gathered from around the world; knowledge he gained throughout his many years of extensive travel, mainly throughout the Mediterranean sites, but also India, Asia, Southeast Asia, South America, North America and beyond.

He worked on various intriguing projects, mainly houses, in Europe, South America, and United States that were widely published during his lifetime and constituted interesting cases in the Modern scene. He stimulated debates on several important topics through his writings and through provocative exhibitions, organized mainly in New York at the Museum of Modern Art. Although he was an extremely influential figure when he was alive, his ideas and his work are little known today, remembered mostly through his iconic book, *Architecture Without Architects*, that is still widely read today and that constituted the catalogue from his main exhibition held at MOMA in 1964.

This paper rises from the intention of understanding the way Rudofsky used his studies of architecture throughout the world, for his own practice of architecture. In doing so, the study attempts to *clarify Rudofsky's* view of modernity and the reason for his interest in the vernacular. The two terms—

modernity and vernacular— are apparently in opposition, as revealed by Rudofsky's continuous critique of the contemporary architecture and from the various interpretations and critiques that spread from his main exhibition. This research will investigate his specific way of interpreting modernism through his extensive study and knowledge of the vernacular, considering that the key factor is the connection between his voyages and his design work.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to bring to light the strong link that exists between the experiential process of traveling and the creative process of design. We would like to show that Rudofsky's main topics of architectural research—developed through his various designs—originate from his initial intuitions and interests beginning with his first experience abroad and continuing for his lifetime. It seems that in the course of his life Rudofsky's effort was to demonstrate that these intuitions were right by continually traveling to the same locations and to other countries in order to prove his argument and to enlarge the material on the subject. In addition to his travels, Rudofsky studied in libraries, various subjects; including geography, philosophy, and anthropology, in order to make those intuitions substantial.

Travelogue

Rudofsky dedicated his whole life to traveling.

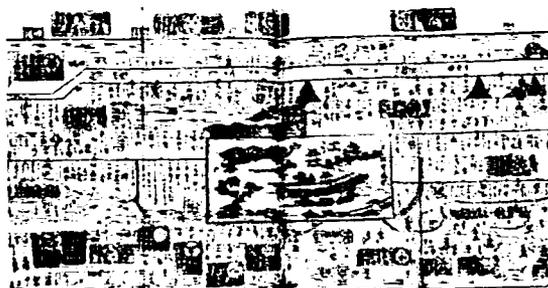
I learned a great deal by travel...The acquaintance with foreign countries; with foreign towns, dead and alive, early became a habit for me. Every year, at the end of June I would depart for points south, and not return before the last days of October.¹

Rudofsky's destinations reached all over the world, to many continents; his journeys did not follow defined paths, they were rather scattered across the globe. A restless nature informs his whole experience, having moved his home base from Europe to South America and finally to North America, in order to escape—being Jewish—the Nazism constraints. His nomadic life influenced his view of the world and culture, he saw it as errant and complex, rather than unilateral.

I shall have to say more about the serene subject of travel in the pursuit of architecture's roots because it was one of my annual trips that not only determined my outlook on domestic architecture but also made me for the rest of my life a displaced person.²

The voyage was for Rudofsky an attitude towards life, an intellectual and physical experience, a means to personal education and development. There is, in fact, no scholarly aim in his travels. He did not follow a rationally constructed path in order to fully investigate a specific aspect of a certain culture, instead his travels respond to an imaginative curiosity, and constituted an authentic experience and a total immersion in particular spaces and in a way of living.

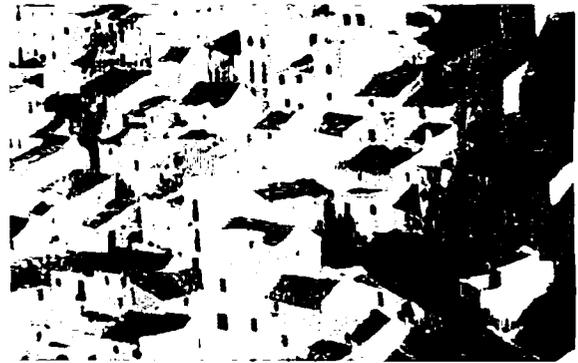
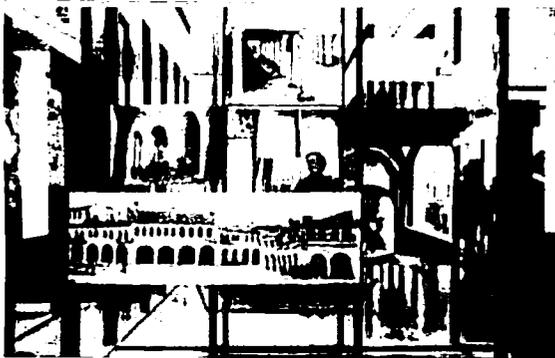
Rudofsky was able to understand place in a multitude of ways. His way of studying the sites was not academic but experiential; he absorbed a place completely, registering not only the architecture, but also the entire culture—local mannerism, lifestyles, dining habits, and even clothing. From his travels, he brought back images, ideas, and ways of living, without any attempt to look for a reason or historical connection. Watercolors, drawings, notes, and photographs made during his travels reveal his reflections, constituting a collage of visual and architectural ideas from various countries and cultures, a fragmented and personal compilation of images, which mixed sites and times.



The best way to explain Rudofsky's way of traveling is by using one of the ancient Japanese maps³ that he collected. The map shows multiple levels of territorial description, being both a plan and an elevation, and commenting—through additional text—places, locations, and routes. It represents a

topographical story, which was supposed to be read from the center outwards⁴. Rudofsky was fascinated and at ease with this different approach to understanding reality, which far from abstract conceptualization, admitted intuition and multiple interpretation, more significant for him than the illusory logic of western civilization. The search for the place through a narrative of adventures and encounters ties the meaning of place to memory, traces of paths, and to a relational and situational dimension. He questions the concept of *place* itself, transforming the static concept into the dynamic nature of the *journey*.

Similarly, Rudofsky identifies travel as the occasions and situations that he meets. In his personal travel books, he makes note of apparently inconsequential details such as the various parts of the meal, together with the cost or the clothing of a woman passing by and her shoes. Through this meticulous precision of the description or the image of a photograph, he recalls the immediacy of a moment, the particularity of an instant in a certain light, or a detail, rather than the grandiosity of an event.



A work of images

The work that Rudofsky pursued using his travel experiences and the images collected, lead to his numerous exhibitions and the subsequent books. *Architecture without Architects*, in particular, developed using his photographs—and many others from various sources and institutions—in order to bring to light a series of architectural issues. The accompanying text has a secondary role: the words clarify what the images well show, giving few accounts about location and context.

The book that represented the catalogue of this famous and seminal exhibition, does not aim to catalogue the material, but leaves the reading as a fragmentary and richly complex whole. The great success of the exhibition was mainly due to the seductive and powerful images themselves, thanks to the work of graphic montage, studied by Rudofsky as curator and designer. He organized the material to immerse the viewer in the various images distributed over various levels and in various sizes in order to realize a rich visual experience, analogous to that of his own travels.

The whole of his work is that of a traveler and it constitutes a travelogue, rather than an academic dissertation. His studies employ vernacular architecture without being a definitive study on a local culture. Rudofsky starts from the understanding of the local condition, from the specificity of the architectural solution, but then he aims to bring it to a general and global lesson in the process of de-contextualization and by bringing together various cultures and sites, through a visual collection of images rather than a speculative examination.

A selective view

Inside the large collection of the material, is possible to extract a few clear topic of interests. In contrast to the physical and cultural differences of his various destinations, his analytical eyes discover a continuous path, selecting similar architectural solutions from various locations, cultures and times.

These recurrent themes do not have the character of a theoretical investigation; instead, they stand for design topics, identified with a formal architectural solution. His eyes are the eyes of an architect; they select an image to reveal the architecture for being evocative, inventive, responding to the local condition, and functional. All those visual and architectural material create a resource of references, ready to use for any design, and exportation to any location or condition.

The main interest of his study was how volumes of a composition come together, mainly how the spaces of a home are organized. Through his watercolors and in his photographs in a large number of villages and towns, Rudofsky depicted inside of their site but also through detailed images in which he 'zooms' on the composition of the volumes. These images become a study of volumes, a mass of blocks studied for their sculptural mutual relationship, through the play of volumes and voids, light and shadow. Compositions from different parts of the world appear as variations of the same theme, a series of formal studies. He does not show interest for the reasons of the development of the arrangements; nor investigation in urban, territorial, or social issues connected to the settlements. Rudofsky is fascinated by these shapes because of their strong formal qualities.

This formal study leads him to an understanding of architecture based on the relationship between spaces, and in particular with exterior spaces. He depicts constantly the flow of sloping terraces and volumes, which characterizes the Mediterranean villages of Italy and Greece. A sketch made in Santorini in 1929⁵ illustrate people occupying various spaces—roofs, terraces, roads, staircase—clarifies the appeal of architecture and urban space at the same level, being a continuous flow of spaces in which there is not definition between inside and outside, between one building and the other.

Another reoccurring topic, Rudofsky continually documented, was the connections between a building and the site. Many of the villages he represents are located in complicated natural formations. The villages often seem to be part of the same slope or cliff, as in a process of spontaneous growth. The particularity of the site condition affirms the strong connection with the ground and the architecture. Photographs of staircase, stone paving, and soil details show that he goes further in investigating through the variety of solutions and physical interaction of the building with the ground. Furthermore, images of caves and quarries show how powerful the attraction for the topic is for Rudofsky.

To those recurrent themes correspond other recurrent architectural solutions that Rudofsky experiments through his designs, mainly houses, in Europe and America. The repetitive and nearly obsessive return on the same issues is a typical course of action of other architects and artists. Aldo Rossi comments on a similar dialogue between the world of references and the world of designs, explaining the continual return to the same things and a varied use of the same forms:

The observation of things may have been my most important formal education; subsequently the observation was transformed into a memory of these things. I now feel that I can see them all arranged in a tidy row, lined up as if in a herbarium, a directory or a dictionary...I now feel that continuing to rework the same thing until it becomes something different is now not merely an exercise, but rather constitutes the only freedom to explore.⁶

Therefore, either in Italy, Spain, Brazil, or New York, Rudofsky seems to use the same elements, re-arranging volumes and solutions. A strong line of research connects the images of the travels and those of the designs. The similarity is not in the language—his houses being clearly modern—but rather in the architectural topics.

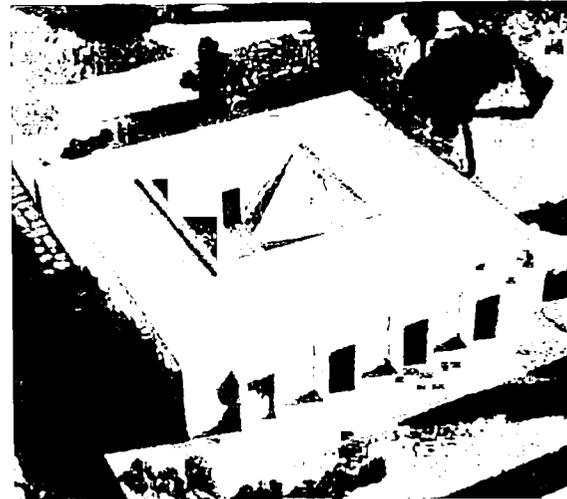
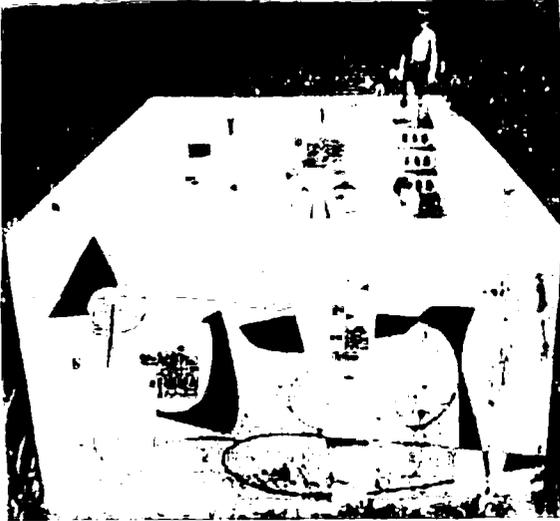
The Villa Oro in Naples, designed with Luigi Cosenza in Naples in 1935, is an extremely



interesting investigation on the composition of spaces that characterises most of the Mediterranean vernacular architecture. The villa stands out as a modern sculpture with the white prismatic volumes, from which parts are subtracted to create open-air living spaces. Located overlooking the whole gulf on a difficult topographic condition, the site offers the opportunity for the manipulation of volumes on various levels and with different shapes and proportions, generating an inextricable continuity between internal and external spaces.

If the villa Oro was a house as an aggregation of volumes—a house-village—the hotel which Rudofsky designed in Anacapri, with Ponti (1938) is an compilation of single houses (the rooms), simple elements reiterated and connected through paths immersed in the green. In order to educate to the experience, the spaces immerse the occupant into the site. The architects even designed the clothes that the clients should wear on their arrival.

The houses designed in Italy—in Procida and Positano—and the Nivola house in New York, show the subsequent radicalization of Rudofsky's investigation on the modern house, in relation to the way of inhabiting its external and indoor spaces.



Inhabiting the archetype house

The house near Positano (1936) was designed together with the Italian architect Luigi Cosenza, as a response to the invitations by Gio' Ponti from the magazine *Domus* for an ideal vacation home. They present a project consisting of two contrasting volumes, which realize—in two opposite ways—a relationship with the site. The spaces gather around a roof

garden and the surfaces of two slabs that connect the volumes. The house—traditionally intended as indoor space—dissolves in the outdoors and it becomes the space in-between the volumes.

Though an ideal design for an imaginary client, the architects developed it as if it was real.⁷ Accompanying the design is an imaginary discussion with the client asking how it would have been possible to live in a house without rooms, shutters, and lobbies: "Where does one dine? Where does one receive guests? Etc.," with the architect replying that the house is like a medicine so the client would "be educated to live differently."⁸ The arguments are substantial and polemically affirmed in the dialogue. The design for a villa on the coast becomes a statement on the way of inhabiting space, and how architecture should respond.

To develop the topic of radical living further Rudofsky designed a project for his wife Berta in Procida (1935).⁹ The design of the house creates a way of living in strong contact with the ground, following a conception of life that is radical as well as ideal. The spaces in the home are an experience of the senses magnified. In the house, one lives barefoot in order "to go back to feel the delight of tickling of the sole of the foot by sand, well mowed grass, or smooth marble." The bed is an entire room of mattress in which you enter barefoot, and the bath is sunken in the floor. One eats lying down on triclinia in the Pompeian manner.¹⁰ Every element of the house had a purpose, to make one question the experience of living.

Being primarily a landscape intervention, the Nivola house (1949-50), is a composition of a series of elements set in an old orchard owned by Italian painter Costantino Nivola. Composed of a series of elements, the project creates an exterior living environment based on many of Rudofsky's ideas compiled through his travels. The solarium brings to mind the images of the underground architecture Rudofsky saw in various areas of the world. It is a room placed into the ground and accessible only by a stairway, designed for nude sunbathing at any time of the year, the room takes advantage of the reflection of the sun on the walls. Other elements are the pergola, a bench, the fireplace, and a freestanding wall intersected by a branch of

an apple tree, which creates moving shadows off the wall's surface. In this project, the modern house becomes simply a catalogue of distinguished and independent elements. The architecture is reduced to its essentials—the room, and the wall, the frame—all studied in their relation to the ground and the light of the sun.

In all his architecture, Rudofsky breaks the architecture of the house in its main parts—the bedroom, the dining room, the bathroom, etc.—re-considering the original meaning of the spaces dedicated to those activities. The house, as a whole, is a 'modern archetype', being the response to the primary and fundamental reasons of its being.

Throughout his life, Rudofsky continuously investigated on these primary activities: the clothing (*Are Clothes Modern?*, exhibition 1944 and book 1947); dining (*Now I Lay me Down to Eat*, 1980); sleeping, and bathing (*Sparta / Sybaris*, 1987). Along his life, and through traveling in various countries, he refines the architecture of the house in its spaces and meanings.

Modernities

Rudofsky's architecture is clearly modern. It loudly affirms itself as an articulation of white volumes, distinct from the environment and rooted on the ground. Meantime Rudofsky's modernity never becomes a stylistic signature. His response to the debated topic of the modern house lies in the study of the relationships between the spaces and in the way of using them, rather than being a formal solution.

What is needed is not a new way of building; what is needed is a new way of life.¹¹

His interest in vernacular architecture was radically modern as well. The exhibition *Architecture without Architects* arose misunderstandings through the critics – mainly from Reynar Banham – or even among the enthusiasts¹²

In one of his lecture, Rudofsky attempted to clarify: "I hope I don't have to assure you that vernacular architecture is no more for copying, adapting, or adopting than historical

architecture. Its lesson, if any, lies elsewhere."¹³

His purpose for the project was neither advocating a nostalgic return to an old moment, nor proposing to use the vernacular architecture as direct reference for contemporary architecture. For him, this was clear. He was, in fact, following a line of research – the modern house – which fascinated the earlier generation of modern architects; Le Corbusier and Sert, who both investigated Mediterranean architecture in a similar way.

Furthermore, Rudofsky himself had participated – when in Italy – to the investigation on the modern house through the study of the local traditions. The interest for spontaneous architecture was in fact topical in the Italy of the '30s, tied to occasions of reference as the exhibition on the rural architecture by Pagano at the VI Milan Triennial in 1936. This issue several architects share – Pagano, Pollini, Ponti, etc -, and at the same time distinguished them through the differentiated ways of reinterpreting the reference material in the architectural project.

The exhibition was clearly also “frankly polemic” toward the contemporary architecture. Rudofsky addressed in fact his critic towards a certain component of modernity that aimed to absolute and fixed rules, to dogmatism and normalizations, which would detach the architecture from the human condition.

The article “The Third Rome” published on the *Architecture Review* in July 1951, clearly exemplifies Rudofsky’s critic on modernity. The quarter of EUR designed during the fascism outside Rome is photographed surrounded by a deserted country, inhabited only by the sheep, commented as a place of “loss of time and space,” unaware of the time of the living – though old – city, only few miles distant. Rudofsky soundly shows the irony of modernity, presenting it in a state of ruin, and so proving that when architecture is designed detached from life and context, it can only lead to a self-destruction.

It is along these lines, as well, that stands his critic to the American suburban house for “the incongruity between the magical modern

kitchen and the melancholy gastronomic results.”

Rudofsky is modern in his research for the true essence, the typical form, the initial element constituting the whole. His modernity is expressed in the freedom to rethink and reformulate what is commonly evident, and in the capacity to reconsider architecture from the scratch inside his unprejudiced view of history and culture.

Rudofsky’s modernity doesn’t make promises; it doesn’t want to build a new future. It rather places itself in constant critic of its own time in order to tend towards a time that is neither past nor future; it’s the time of the constant everyday, of the everyday that existed since ever – that condition that reaffirms man’s existential state.

Note:

P.I.: A. Como supported by Rosemary Dowden, Graduate Research Assistant

All images (except those cited) are from the Getty Research Institute, Special Collections and Visual Resources: Bernard Rudofsky Papers, ca 1910-1987.

¹ B. Rudofsky, lecture at the IDCA Aspen, 1980 in A. Bocco Guarneri, *Bernard Rudofsky: A Humane Designer*, New York: Springer Wien, 2003. 226-230.

² Ibid.

³ B. Rudofsky, *The Kimono Mind: An Informal Guide to Japan and the Japanese*, New York : Doubleday, 1965.

⁴ B. Rudofsky, *The Kimono Mind: An Informal Guide to Japan and the Japanese*, New York : Doubleday, 1965.

⁵ A. Bocco Guarneri, 132.

⁶ A. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, Cambridge: MIT press, 1981.

⁷ *Domus* 109, 1937.

⁸ G. Cosenza and F.D. Moccia (eds.), *Luigi Cosenza, L'opera Completa*. Napoli: Electa Napoli 1987.

⁹ *Casabella* 117, 1937.

¹⁰ In Pompeii the stone triclinium of the House of Caro struck Rudofsky who sketched it and later showed it in his text *Now I lay me down to eat* (New York, 1980), in which he investigates upon spaces and manners of dining through times.

¹¹ B. Rudofsky, title of the article in *Domus* 123, 1938.

¹² F. Scott, *Revisiting Architecture without Architects*, Harvard Design Magazine, fall 1998, p. 69-72; and *Bernard Rudofsky: Allegories of Nomadism and Dwelling*, in S. Williams Golhagen and R. Legault, *Anxious Modernism*, 2000.

¹³ Lecture at RIBA , in A. Bocco Guarneri.